

A Different End In The Valley

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A very different conclusion to the battle in the valley of the end. The story of a death and all that follows. Character death.

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End in the valley

The rain was pouring down. His eyes hurt and so he shut them. He felt weak, like he was made of straw. His eyes, they were burning. He felt his head band come loose and an ache in his stomach. He vomited and dropped to his knees. He opened his eyes. He looked down into the face of his best friend, the boy who had tried to save him and bring him home. His vision was sharper than it had been before. He could clearly see every line on Naruto's face. The boy's eyes were closed and he looked like he was asleep. But he wasn't asleep. Sasuke looked at the hole in the middle of his chest, the one he had put there. The Mangekyo Sharingan let him see the damage to the body clearly. He didn't want to see it, didn't want to be reminded of what he had just done. He shut his eyes and deactivated his sharingan.

He opened his eyes again and began staring. He knew it had to be this way. He knew the only way he could defeat his brother was with his own Mangekyo Sharingan. He was an avenger and he had to do whatever was necessary to destroy Itachi and avenge his family. He should have been happy; he was now a long step closer to achieving his goal. He had gained power and with the help of Orochimaru he would gain more. And all it had cost was the life of one loud mouthed dobe.

So why did he feel like crying? Why did he want to scream out and beg Naruto for his forgiveness? Why was he remembering Wave country and the time he had nearly died trying to protect him? Why was he remembering the bell test and giving a tied up Naruto food? Why was he remembering carrying an unconscious Naruto back to Konoha after he had defeated Gaara? Why was he remembering that annoying grin and that loud voice proclaiming that he would be Hokage one day? Why did he feel the urge to carry his friend back to Konoha and answer for what he had just done?

He shut his eyes and took a deep breath. No! He couldn't stop now. If he went back he would be executed. Then Itachi would win and his family would never be avenged. If that happened, then what was it all for? No, he couldn't go back. He had told Sakura that new paths would open now and he had meant what he'd said. He had chosen vengeance; he had chosen to give up his happiness and his home in order to acquire power. He'd made his choice; he knew he couldn't go back.

"Naruto... I'm sorry."

He got back up and stumbled off into the rain.

Pakkun spoke quietly. "The rain has washed away the trail, I can't track Sasuke anymore."

Kakashi said nothing. He simply knelt there over the body of his student. He felt his tears even in the rain. This was his fault. He should have paid more attention; he should have given Naruto more of his time instead of playing favorites. He should have been a better sensei and a better friend. And he should never, ever, have taught Sasuke how to use Chidori.

"How did we come to this?" He said in a whisper. "Forgive me Naruto. Forgive me Arashi-sensei."

"Kakashi," Pakkun said quietly. "What do you want to do?"

Kakashi pulled out a mottled green poncho from one of his belt pouches. He gently wrapped Naruto's body in it and took him into his arms. "There is nothing to do except bring Naruto home and inform the Hokage."

"What about Sasuke?"

"Sasuke can wait." There was just the tiniest bit of heat in his voice. "I'll take care of him sooner or later."

Pakkun understood exactly what those words meant. "He is your student, aren't you going to try and save him?"

"No, he *was* my student. What he is now is a traitor, a missing nin, and a murderer." Kakashi leapt away with Naruto held firmly in his arms. Pakkun followed and said nothing more.

Tsunade stepped out of the emergency room. Shikamaru, Shikaku and Temari were standing in the hall on edge. She smiled. "Chouji is going to be all right." Shikaku and Temari looked relieved; Shikamaru was facing away from her. She was about to thank Shikaku for bringing her his clan's medical tome when she saw Shizune approaching from the other end of the hall. One look at her student's face told her something wrong.

"Shizune what's wrong? Is Neji all right?"

To her surprise Shizune nodded, but her expression remained heart broken. "I am pleased to say the operation was a success and Neji is now in stable condition."

Those words gave Tsunade no relief. "Then what's wrong?" Shikamaru and the others had picked up on her fears and all were staring at a solemn Shizune.

Shizune cast her eyes down. "Lady Tsunade, Kakashi has just returned and asks to speak with you in private. He is... in sub level two."

Tsunade gasped and felt the cold and familiar dread. The others didn't understand of course. Sub level two was the location of the hospital's morgue. "Who?" Her voice shook. She already knew, in the recesses of her heart she knew.

"Lady Tsunade we should speak in private."

But Tsunade shook her head. "Damn it Shizune just tell me, who has died?" Gasps came from both Shikamaru and Temari. Shikaku merely waited silently.

Shizune looked up from the floor. Her eyes filled with tears. "Naruto."

Good bye

The three of them stood around the cold metal table looking silently at the body. Tsunade, Kakashi, and Shizune simply stood there; united in their grief. Finally Tsunade moved to the table. Gently reaching down she pulled back his hitai-ite. Leaning down she kissed the forehead of the boy she had begun to think of as a son.

"Good bye my sweet Naruto. I am proud of you and I love you." She stood up again and wiped her tears away. When she saw Shizune moving to remove the necklace she held out her hand. "No, it's his. It goes with him."

Shizune looked at her and spoke carefully. "But Lady Tsunade, it is the Shodai's necklace, your grandfather's legacy."

"I know what it is. It's a curse and I won't let it claim anyone else. I gave it to Naruto and I will not take it back." Shizune nodded, she really had no heart to argue. Tsunade's eyes left the boy's peaceful face and settled on the wound. "Who did this Kakashi?"

"Sasuke," he said quietly.

Shizune gasped and Tsunade looked at him in hurt and shock. "Sasuke did this to his own teammate?"

Kakashi nodded. "The others had all become involved in individual battles and so he was left alone to try and stop Sasuke. I sensed a battle using a tremendous amount of chakra. But by the time I could reach it all that was left was Naruto and this." He held out a battered hitai-ite with a deep scratch running through it. "Pakkun confirms it is definitely Sasuke's and that wound was inflicted by chidori."

Tsunade flashed him a look of anger. "Your signature move."

Kakashi nodded sadly. "I instructed Sasuke how to use it for the Chunin exams."

" *Why* did you instruct him in an assassination technique?"

He looked down in shame. "I came to the conclusion that it was the only way he could defeat Gaara. Guy questioned it and when he did I brushed it off, but he was right. I never should have taught it to him. This is my fault."

But she shook her head. "No, while I agree you should never have taught him that technique, I am the only one to blame. I should never have ordered this mission."

Kakashi looked up at her. "Hokage-sama you are not to blame. You did what had to be done. This is part of what it means to be shinobi."

She looked at him. "Keep those words in mind the next time you wish to blame yourself." She took a deep breath. "Kakashi, I want you to bring Guy, Asuma, Kurenai, Shikaku, Inoichi, and yourself to my office for a meeting in one hour." She gave him a stern look. "And if you are one minute late Kakashi I will put you in a cell, no more of your foolish tardiness."

He nodded. "Hai, Hokage-sama." He left to fulfill the order.

She turned to Shizune. "Contact all members of the Council and inform them I am calling an emergency meeting in my office in one hour."

"Yes, Lady Tsunade." She looked at her with sympathy. "Are you all right?"

"No, not even close, but I'll manage." Shizune nodded and left. Leaving Tsunade alone with Naruto. She looked at the brave boy. In her mind's eyes she saw Nawaki and Dan. She nodded to herself, yes let the necklace stay with him, she could at least give him that. No, there was still one more thing she could do. "I am so sorry you never got to fulfill your dream Naruto. I know you would have been a far greater Hokage than I will ever be. But you're a hero; you lived your whole life being hated for something that wasn't your fault. You

bore that and you never let it break your spirit. I know what it is to suffer pain and loss and I know I could never have been as strong. You are a hero of Konohagakure, and I swear to you that I will make them all acknowledge that even if it takes my last breath."

"Are they here or not?!" Sakura asked angrily.

The nurse behind the desk stood up frowned down at her. "Lower your voice, this is a hospital."

"I'm sorry." She was frustrated; no one would give her a straight answer. "Look all I want to know is if Naruto and Sasuke have returned."

The nurse sat back down but continued to frown at the pink haired girl. "I am sorry but I cannot release any information."

"Why not?" She ground out. "Look I already know that the rest of the team has returned. My friend has gone to see Chouji and I know that Neji, Shikamaru, and Kiba are all back as well. I just want to know about my teammates."

But the nurse shook her head. "I am sorry, but we are not releasing any information at this time. I *am* sorry."

Something about the way the nurse had just said that made her heart skip a beat and made her stomach sink. "Can't you tell me anything? Just tell me if they're all right!"

"Sakura! Stop taking your frustration out on that poor nurse."

She turned to see Kakashi walk out into the lobby. "Kakashi! What's happened? Are Naruto and Sasuke-kun alright?"

He looked at her sadly and Sakura began to feel very afraid. "Meet me on the roof." He disappeared in a swirl of wind and leaves before

she could ask anything more. With her heart pounding she ran to the stairwell.

"Hinata."

The girl stopped and looked over in the direction she had been called from. There was a very worn looking Shikamaru and a blonde sand ninja she remembered from the exams standing right beside him. Hinata was a bit surprised to see the girl; she didn't remember her name, with what looked like a comforting hand on his shoulder. She thought his eyes looked very red and as he came over to her it was obvious he was in misery. "Shikamaru are you alright?"

He nodded, "I'm fine."

"I brought these flowers for Neji. A nurse told me he is out of surgery but that I won't be able to see him for awhile."

He nodded again. "I know. And I am very glad he is going to be all right. Chouji was also seriously hurt but he's going to be fine too, and so will Kiba."

"What about Naruto?" She saw him flinch and the girl gave her a look of the deepest sorrow. Hinata suddenly felt very cold and very frightened. "Is Naruto-kun all right?"

Shikamaru slowly shook his head. He knew how Hinata felt about him, everyone did except for the object of her affections. He wanted more anything to be anywhere else, but he had been team leader. He was the one *responsible* and he owed it to both Naruto and to her to be the one to tell her. "Hinata, I am so very sorry, he is gone."

"Gone?" She said in a hollow voice.

Shikamaru looked into her lavender eyes. "He died on the mission, I am so sorry Hinata."

She didn't notice when the flowers slipped from her hand, or when she collapsed to her knees. "Naruto..." she began to sob and both Shikamaru and the girl put their arms around her to try and console her. "No, no he can't be... Naruto. Naruto I love you, I love you..." She began to cry too hard to say anything more.

" **You're lying!!**" Sakura screamed at him. "Naruto... Sasuke he..." She shook her head. " **It's a damn lie!!** " She began beating his chest as hard as she could. Kakashi didn't try to stop her. If this was what she needed to deal with her grief then she could take it all out on him. She punched him and hit him for a few minutes. Then she gave up and fell forward into his chest. She began to sob into his vest. "Kakashi-sensei, please tell me it's a lie!" She looked up at him pleading. "Tell me it's all some sort of sick joke and that Naruto is alive and well."

He put his arms around her, trying his best to comfort her. "I'm sorry Sakura, I would give my own life to make it true, but I'm afraid Naruto is gone."

"Why?!" she wailed and pressed her crying face into his chest. "Why would Sasuke do that?! They were friends! They were friends!"

Kakashi suspected he knew the answer to that, and it sickened him. Sasuke had followed in his brother's footsteps and killed his best friend in order to acquire greater power. But that wasn't what Sakura needed to hear right now. "I don't know Sakura." She just continued to cry. He wanted to stay and help her through this. He knew what it was to lose a teammate and how it could tear your soul. She at least was lucky in one respect, she hadn't had to see it and the blood wasn't on her hands. "Sakura I'm very sorry, but I have a mission from the Hokage and I have to go. I should already have gone, but I couldn't let you find this out from someone else.

She tried to smile. "I understand, 'even in the face of loss the mission must be completed.' That's the fourth rule; please complete your Kakashi I understand. I'll be fine."

"I will come see you as soon as I can Sakura, that is a promise."

She nodded. Kakashi tried to give her a last smile from beneath his mask. He was gone.

Sakura was all alone. With her tears still falling she moved shakily towards the stairs. She needed to find Ino; she needed someone to be with.

Article seven

She was truly not surprised to see a gigantic frog sitting out in front of Hokage Tower. There he was, her old teammate waiting for her on the steps. He hurried over to her and wasted no words. "Tsunade I've heard that Naruto has died. Is it true?"

She looked him in the eye and slowly nodded. "Your informants are as good as ever. One of these days you're going to have to tell me just who some of them are, but that can wait."

He nodded sadly. "I am sorry; he was a good kid, even if he did call me a pervert all the damn time."

"He was certainly perceptive and honest." She somehow managed a weak grin.

"He always called you, 'grandma.'" He reminded her.

"I know," she said miserably. "Like I said, perceptive and honest." She began walking up the steps and he fell in beside her.

"I should have come sooner; I was planning to take him with me to train." He shook his head. "I should have been here."

"Don't say that, there is plenty of blame to go around. For instance we can blame the idiot Hokage who ordered a brand new Chunin and a group of Genin to take on a bunch of curse sealed ninjas. I alone will accept the responsibility for this tragedy."

Jiraiya looked at her. "You sent them to try and prevent the defection of Uchiha Sasuke is that right?" She nodded. "Then you really had no choice, you had to try and prevent Sasuke from betraying us."

She stared at him. "I know about taking chances and running risks. But it's one thing to bet it all on a flush or a straight. It's very different to take the risk on a pair of fours. Given what I sent them up against

it's not a surprise one of them didn't come back. It's a surprise we didn't lose more. If it weren't for aid from Sand and some luck in the operating room we might have lost them *all*, including Rock Lee who went after them to help. I shouldn't have sent them; I let my desperation overcome my sense."

"Not the first time." He commented.

"No, but this time it didn't cost me a stack of chips. It cost Naruto's life."

He stopped and took a hold of her arm. "Stop it Tsunade." He said in a firm, no nonsense voice. "Naruto's death was tragic and I am going to miss him, he was a good kid. But we both know what it means to be shinobi and so did he. He understood the risks and he took them. You did what you had to, just as he did. If any one is to blame for this it's Uchiha Sasuke; not only for killing him but for deserting in the first place."

She nodded grimly. "Oh, believe me I know. And believe me when I say they are *all* going to pay for this. Sasuke, Orochimaru, Kabuto, and every last person who supports them is going to pay for what happened today. Now come on we need to talk." She continued on the way to her office.

Outside the office door she ordered an additional guard be posted and sent a few orders. She then went into the office with Jiraiya and locked the door. Going over to her desk she took out a bottle and two shot glasses.

"Why Hokage you keep alcohol in your office? I am shocked."

"Oh, cut the crap I'm not in the mood." She filled one glass and handed it to him. Then she filled the second. She lifted hers up. "To Naruto, the greatest Hokage that will never be."

He clinked glasses with her. "To Naruto." He agreed solemnly. They both downed their drinks. "Now what did you want to discuss?"

She put the bottle away. "I wasn't joking about making every last snake pay for his death. I am ready to do *whatever* it takes to avenge him and destroy the threat to Konoha."

Jiraiya nodded. "So what did you have in mind?" She spent the next several minutes telling him what she had in mind. "You're serious?"

"I am deadly serious."

"If you do this you are going to make a lot of people very unhappy and you are going to cost a lot of lives, ours as well as theirs."

"I know. But if it destroys Orochimaru and his evil once and for all the price will be worth it." Jiraiya was not so certain of that. "Will you help me? If you don't want to I can't force you, but I would like your help."

He looked at her. He knew that what she was about to do would be a long and bloody mess. But she was his oldest and dearest friend and she was his Hokage. There could only be one answer. "If you need me I am yours."

She nodded. "Good, now to begin with I'd like to find out how much you know about his headquarters"

"Not near as much as I would like. But to begin with..."

The Council was not used to being kept waiting. They were all assembled and standing in the reception area outside the Hokage's door. They were also not happy at the sudden summons and demand that they attend this emergency meeting. They were also a bit surprised by the heavy ANBU presence. There were a dozen of them, three full platoons standing there with them. That seemed rather excessive. They also noted a few faces that weren't on the Council, Kakashi and a few of the other Jonin squad leaders. They all knew what this was about of course. Uchiha Sasuke had defected to Orochimaru. This was a disaster to rival the Uchiha massacre and the betrayal of Itachi. They didn't know the details but it seemed

certain that Sasuke had made good his escape and was now lost to Konoha. The loss of the last Uchiha was without a doubt a tragic event and warranted a meeting of the Council. What several members doubted though was that it warranted such unseemly haste. At last the doors opened.

Shizune smiled out at them. "The Hokage will see you now."

With that they all entered in through the wide doors into her office. When they saw her they were a bit surprised. She was wearing the formal red and white robes of her office and was standing in front of her desk. Even more surprising was who was there standing with her. On her right side was Jiraiya, her fellow Sanin, and to her left was Yamato, head of the ANBU. And standing there a few feet behind him was Morino Ibiki, head of Konoha's Torture and Interrogation Force. His presence was never accidental and it was a clear signal to all of them that whatever the Hokage meant to say she was expecting opposition and was ready to quell it.

"Thank you all for coming here on such short notice. Please believe me that only the most dire news would have forced me to call all of you."

"What news is that Hokage-sama?" Hyuuga Hiashi asked.

She nodded to him. "As I suspect you may already know Uchiha Sasuke has defected from Konoha." She paused and waited for the reaction. Heads bobbed up and down and there were unhappy murmurs, but while there was a general feeling of discontent there certainly was no sense of shock. "What you may not know is that along with being a traitor Uchiha Sasuke is also a murderer. He is guilty of the murder of one of the Genins sent to retrieve him."

Now this did catch them all by surprise. "Who was lost?" Danzo asked.

She gave them all a nasty grin as she got ready to unleash the first of her surprises today. "He killed the only son of the Yondaime

Hokage, and the last living member of the Kazama clan." That got exactly the reaction she'd been hoping for. There was a single moment of absolute silence, followed by an explosion of denials, questions, and demands. The only people in the room not in shock were herself, Jiraiya, and Kakashi.

Ultimately it was Koharu who stepped forward and brought the others back into order. The old woman was the former teammate of the Sandaime, and had called her granduncle the Nidaime, sensei. She was strong, set in her ways, and not the least bit afraid to challenge or oppose her Hokage. "What do you mean, the son of the Yondaime? It is well known that Arashi died childless. His wife was expecting but she died during the Kyuubi's attack."

Tsunade nodded in sad agreement. "It is true that she did die in the attack, but only *after* giving birth to a healthy baby boy. The Yondaime understood that no human could slay the Kyuubi. The only way to stop the monster's rampage was to bind it to a container. The Yondaime felt that as Hokage the duty fell to his family to make the sacrifice necessary to save Konoha. So he bound the Kyuubi to his only son, Kazama Naruto, known to this village as Uzumaki Naruto."

"That is a lie!" Koharu shouted at her.

"Why?" she replied coldly. "Because you cannot imagine treating the Yondaime's heir as cruelly as you did Uzumaki Naruto? Naruto was the Yondaime's son; his name and identity were altered to protect him from his many enemies both inside and outside this village. The Kazama estates and fortune have been held in trust for all these years. Have any of you ever bothered to wonder why?" She was pleased to have shut them up with that simple question. "The reason was that there was an heir. Had he lived to his sixteenth birthday the truth would have been revealed to him and to this village. He would have been recognized officially as the Kazama clan head and would have inherited all the family wealth and properties."

They were all staring at her in disbelief. The Kazama clan had once been as wealthy and influential as either Hyuuga or Uchiha. Had he

lived Uzumaki Naruto would also have inherited his clan's seat on the council. The idea that Naruto would have been one of them was somewhat shattering. "Do you have any proof of this?" Koharu asked coldly.

She nodded to her former teammate. "Jiraiya delivered Naruto and can confirm his identity."

"How convenient." Koharu replied.

"I didn't say it was the *only* proof." Turning back to her desk she pulled just two of the many documents sitting there. "I trust you still recognize the Sandaime's hand writing? This is the letter that he wrote for his successor in case he died in office, he spells out everything in it. And this is the last will and testament of Kazama Arashi. You will see it clearly names his son *Naruto* as sole heir."

The two documents made their way around the room from person to person. The council members argued among themselves, but it was agreed that the documents *seemed* legitimate.

"All of this is rather shocking," Koharu admitted. "But since the boy is dead it doesn't really matter now does it?"

"Doesn't matter?" Tsunade ground out, just keeping hold of her temper.

But Koharu calmly shook her head. "All of this shall remain secret; I can see no reason to embarrass people with this. For all these years it has been believed that the Yondaime sealed the Kyuubi into an orphan child. What would be gained by revealing the truth now that the child is dead?"

"I see," Tsunade answered with a savage smile. "You find the truth just a bit *inconvenient* do you? Don't much like the thought that the poor boy you ignored and abused and hurt for all those years was really the flesh and blood of your greatest hero? Does that suddenly make the shameful behavior of this village seem worse to you?"

Because frankly I find it disgusting whether it was done to a nameless orphan or a clan heir."

"Hokage-sama, I admit that you have a point." Hiashi spoke with a quiet dignity. "Our past behavior was not what it should have been. Nevertheless, what would be gained by revealing the truth now?"

"Naruto would finally gain the respect in death that he was never permitted to have in life. He would be remembered as a hero and as the last son of a proud line."

"Let the dead rest Tsunade." Koharu spoke. "This would only cause embarrassment and shame to a great many. Let all of this be buried with Naruto and let it be forgotten."

"You mean let *him* be forgotten. You all want to pretend that the Yondaime was the only hero and that Naruto never existed. You just want to forget your own shameful behavior towards that brave boy."

The old woman shook her head tiredly. "The Council will pass a law sealing all of this; you will not be permitted to reveal it."

"Is that a fact?" Tsunade said with fire in her eyes.

"It is, you will abide by the will of the Council."

Tsunade smiled and took another document from her desk. "Thank you, that will make this so much easier." She handed the document over to her. "Please read that and note that it already bears my name and seal, and so is already in effect."

Koharu needed only to read the first few lines. She stared at Tsunade with an open mouth. "Is this some sort of joke? Some kind of bluff?"

Tsunade shook her head. "I've been known to bluff, but since I have the winning hand I don't need to."

"The Council will not stand for this!" Koharu said angrily.

"What Council?" Tsunade replied coldly. "All I see in front of me are some people I invited to my office."

"What do you mean by that?" Danzo demanded.

She took a moment to look at all of them. "As per Article seven of the Constitution, I as legally chosen Hokage am invoking my right to dissolve this Council and rule as sole authority. As of this moment I am declaring a state of emergency and placing Konohagakure under martial law."

"What emergency?" Hiashi asked.

"A war." She picked up one more document and handed this one over to Hiashi. "That one is a declaration of war against Sound."

"Have we been invaded?" Koharu asked in shock.

But Tsunade smiled and shook her head. "No, this time we'll be the ones who do the invading. I'm taking us to war against Orochimaru. And when we're done we'll have killed every last damn snake and burned all of Rice country down to the ground."

A small request

Koharu stared at Tsunade. She was over her momentary shock and was hardly ready to yield. "Do you really think you can just brush us aside?" She looked around at her fellow Council members. "You will find the heads of every single major clan here. Are you really ready to face their combined opposition?"

Tsunade was about to give a hearty, 'yes,' but before she could another voice spoke up.

"She will not need to." Nara Shikaku spoke in a clear voice. He rarely attended Council meetings and had been brought here by Kakashi. But the Nara clan was regarded highly and he was not one to remain silent when something really did need to be said. "As she has pointed out she is acting within her rights under her emergency powers."

Koharu turned to her unexpected opponent. "She is inventing a crisis to seize power! Once she does this she will never reconstitute the Council!"

"Good! I won't have to put up with these boring meetings and having to listen to you and Danzo drone on. As for inventing a crisis, tell me did she also invent Orochimaru's attack on this village just a few months ago? As long as he is alive he is a threat to Konoha. The Hokage *should* do whatever she must to protect us, even if it means starting a war."

"And what about the rest of it?"

He frowned at her. "I did not really know him, but if what Tsunade says is true then Uzumaki Naruto deserves to be honored and remembered." He looked at his Hokage. "I did not abuse or speak ill of the boy. But neither did I make any effort to help him or get to know him. And for that I am sorry." Tsunade graciously nodded her

appreciation at his support. He turned back to Koharu. "The Nara clan will support the Hokage in whatever she sees fit to do."

Inoichi spoke immediately, backing his friend and former teammate. "Yamanaka will also support the Hokage. And I am certain if Choza were here he would voice the same for Akimichi."

"Inuzuka will always be loyal and faithful to the Hokage!" Tsume barked out.

"Clan Aburame acknowledges the right and justification of this action and will carry out the lawful orders of the Hokage." Shibi said in a calm and dispassionate voice.

One of the Council members looked over to Asuma. Asuma gave a firm nod and his older brother spoke. "Sarutobi stands with the Hokage."

One after another most of the Council members fell into line and voiced their support. In the end only Koharu, Danzo, and a handful of others remained silent. Most eyes were drawn to the stoic figure of Hyuuga Hiashi. He remained silent.

"Very well," Tsunade spoke up once the declarations had all been made. "Those of you who have voiced your support of me I thank you. I know I will be able to depend on you and your clans in the hard days that lie ahead." She shifted her focus to Koharu and spoke with a hard voice. "Those of you who have not are free to *think* whatever you please. We are a free nation and free people after all. However, in time of war to *act* against legal authority, even if you disagree with it, can only be considered treason. Any of you who do not feel you can in good conscience carry out my orders may resign your shinobi standing right now." Her eyes flattened. "Do you wish to resign Koharu?" She held out her hand to accept her hitai-ite.

Once again she found herself looking at the Hokage at shock. The mere idea that she would give up her shinobi status and revert to a

mere citizen was shocking. But she had no doubt that the Hokage was serious. Slowly she shook her head. "No, I do not."

"Then do you feel yourself capable of carrying out whatever orders I may assign you? Can I count on you not to cause dissension and division in this dangerous time?" Put on the spot she felt she had no choice but to nod.

Tsunade nodded as well, satisfied with her victory. She knew the old woman much too well to believe she would remain weak. But she did at least seem to understand that they were playing for keeps. The woman would cause problems, but so long as they were small problems Tsunade would be content with that. She gave Hiashi a quick glance; he might be more of a problem. Well, soon enough for that.

"Does anyone else here wish to resign? Does anyone doubt they will be able to carry out my war orders?" She gave them a moment before nodding into their silence. "In that case I thank you all for coming and ask you to not speak to anyone about any of this. I will speak publicly to Konoha this afternoon. Now I ask that all of you who were not asked here by Kakashi to please depart with my thanks. I would also ask Hiashi and Danzo to remain as well."

The council members who were not asked to stay slowly withdrew, while the others waited anxiously to hear what was in store for them. As they left a single ANBU with a wolf's mask came in. He approached the Hokage and whispered in her ear. She nodded, and looked over to Yamato. He in turn looked at the squad members in the room and gave them a slight nod. The five ANBU in the room quickly surrounded Danzo.

"I am placing you under arrest." Yamato said.

Danzo looked at him in disbelief. "Are you insane? I am a Council member, I have councilor privilege!"

"That ended an hour ago Danzo when I signed my decree, or weren't you listening?" Tsunade spoke icily.

Danzo stared at her with serene eyes. "I see. So Tsunade you are arresting your political opponents with your new authority? I will at least congratulate you on not wasting time."

"You're being arrested for treason and for conspiring with a known enemy of Konoha. While you've been here the ANBU have conducted a search of your home and office. They have discovered evidence of your correspondence with Orochimaru."

A shocked murmur ran through those who were there. Danzo never lost his calm façade. "I see, in that case honorable Hokage may I make a small request? Will you permit me to commit seppuku?"

Tsunade looked at him in surprise. "Do you not wish to stand trial?"

"A trial would be pointless. Though I am certain you will not believe this, it was never my intention to betray Konoha. Nevertheless, I am indeed guilty of corresponding with Orochimaru. A trial would be irrelevant and would cause harm to the public morale. What I did I did in the honest belief that it would help my village. I understood the risks and am prepared to face my punishment. I am shinobi, I do not fear death. I ask only that you permit me to end my life in a manner of my own choosing."

She slowly nodded. "Very well, Captain Yamato escort the prisoner to his home and permit him access to a blade."

"Yes Hokage-sama."

Danzo bowed to her. "Thank you Hokage-sama." He was then escorted out of the office.

When he was gone she looked at the men and women gathered in her office. "Now I want to discuss the reason I have asked you all here."

The S plus mission

She turned to those that she had specifically asked for and began to share her plans with them.

"As I've said we're going to war. My first order is the cancellation of all missions above D-rank and the summoning of all Leaf shinobi to return immediately." Most of them simply nodded.

"Hokage-sama," Kurenai spoke up. "Won't canceling all the missions destroy our economy?"

Tsunade nodded. "War is always expensive, but it can't be helped. All shinobi who are not in the invasion force will remain here in the village to guard it. We can't spare anyone for anything else."

"But what about our signed contracts?" Shizune asked.

Tsunade grimaced. "Unfortunately they're going to have to be broken."

"Will we be able to afford this war?" Shizune asked.

Tsunade gave her a grim smile. "Shizune you of all people should know that when you need to you can *always* borrow." Shizune nodded gloomily. After all her time traveling with Tsunade she did indeed know about going into debt. It was not something to seek out. "We'll find a way to pay for it never fear." She picked up a report from her desk. "We have a grand total of 1,623 active duty shinobi. We will take 1,000 of the most combat effective and form an army consisting of two divisions. All the remaining shinobi will be a defense force to guard us against any surprises. Asuma I hereby name you general, congratulations."

Asuma's jaw dropped open and his cigarette fell out. He looked anything but happy at the sudden promotion. "Hokage-sama I thank

you but surely I am not the best choice. Kakashi and Jiraiya are both better qualified."

Kakashi swiftly shook his head. "No thanks!"

Jiraiya shook his head as well. "The Hokage has other things in mind for us."

"That's true, Asuma you fought in the last war as have most of you here except for Kurenai and Shizune. You know what war is and I trust that you will lead as well as your father could have. I have complete faith in you Asuma."

He let out a long sigh. How could you say no when your Hokage told you she had complete faith in you? You really couldn't. "I could never be the leader my father was, but I will do the best that I can. May I ask to have someone as my assistant?"

"Shikamaru?" Tsunade asked knowingly. Asuma nodded. "He is your staff officer."

"Thank you Hokage-sama." Neither of them noticed a worried look on Shikaku's face.

"As I'm sure you are all aware it takes some time to organize an army. It may take up to a month. In the meanwhile it will be impossible to keep such a massive undertaking secret. Therefore I don't intend to try. I am sending both the Daimyo of Rice country and Orochimaru himself a formal declaration of war and a demand that they surrender to us unconditionally."

"What good would that do?" Kakashi asked.

"As far as the Sound forces? None at all. But it will be respected by the other powers that we are fighting by the rules. And speaking of the rules," she took a deep breath. "This will be a very hard war. Not only must we completely annihilate all of Orochimaru's support network and servants but we must set an example for all other

leaders. If Orochimaru should escape us I want every other Daimyo and leader on this continent to know what happens if you join him. Therefore, I am ordering every last village, town, and city we capture to be burned down. This is total war and we are going to destroy Rice country's infrastructure. When the war is over the lands will be annexed to Fire country."

"If we do this Tsunade," Jiraiya spoke quietly. "Many innocent civilians will suffer. Many of them will surely die and many more will lose everything."

"I know that! Don't you think I've thought about that?" She said sharply.

He frowned at his former teammate. "It has only been a few hours. You said yourself it will be awhile before the army can be formed and move out. Why not take the time to..."

"The order stands Jiraiya." She looked at him directly. "Do you want out?"

He considered it. This was going to be a very bloody business. But he shook his head. "I'm not abandoning you or Konoha."

She nodded gratefully. "Now as for the rest of you I have a very special assignment for you all. It's an S plus rank mission, the highest category because it is of absolutely vital importance."

"I already don't like it." Kakashi murmured.

"Kakashi, Kurenai, and Hiashi, you are hereby assigned to squad Tsunade. Shikaku, Inoichi, and Guy you are hereby assigned to squad Jiraiya. Our two squads will leave Konoha exactly twelve hours ahead of the army on a special mission."

"Hokage-sama you can't go on a mission during war time!" Asuma objected. "Your place is here running things or at the head of the army as its commander."

She shook her head. "Normally I would agree with you. But this assignment has priority and Jiraiya and I have to be there or it won't succeed."

"Oh no, I think I know where this is headed." Kakashi said.

Ignoring him she continued. "The name of the operation will be, 'cut off the head of the snake.' Our mission goal is exactly that. As he watches the army approaching and focuses on that we will infiltrate his headquarters and kill Orochimaru, Sasuke, Kabuto, and whoever else we find there."

Way of the Shinobi

"Respectfully Hokage-sama I must decline. As the clan head of Hyuga I cannot allow myself to be placed in such a dangerous position." Hiashi said quietly.

Tsunade looked at him. "You cannot refuse an S-rank mission. That is the law as for you as anyone else."

He stiffened a bit. "Lady Tsunade my clan and I will serve you in this war. I myself will, of course, go into battle. However for the sake of my clan I cannot put myself into a situation that seems likely to end with high casualties."

"Thanks for the positive outlook." Kakashi put in.

Hiashi frowned at the copy nin. "I do not question any of your abilities. I merely state the obvious, that such a mission is too likely to be at high cost whether it is successful or not."

"This is war, there are going to be casualties." Tsunade said coldly. "There already have been. I am doing this to protect Konoha in the long run. But so long as Orochimaru is alive he will pose a serious threat. I will do anything, including sacrificing my own life, to end that threat. In the last war you were one of our finest front line combatants. I asked you here because you are the strongest of the Hyuga and your skills may well make the difference between success and failure."

He bowed slightly to her at the praise. "I thank you Hokage-sama, but never the less I cannot put myself at such extreme risk."

Tsunade frowned at him. "That is not your decision. I expect every last shinobi of Konohagakure to obey orders and you are not an exception. Either you obey my orders or you resign as shinobi right now and I will choose the next leader of your clan. And don't tell me I

can't, in war time the Hokage has special powers which **include** naming leaders of a clan that have suffered a loss at that position."

Hiashi stiffened. "You are burning a great many bridges here today Tsunade."

"That's Hokage!" Asuma said sharply.

Hiashi ignored the outburst. "It seems I have no choice then, I will go on this mission. However I will not forget this."

"Oh I'll just bet you won't." Tsunade said.

Twenty minutes later Tsunade brought the meeting to a close. But Shikaku approached her. "Hokage-sama, may I have a few minutes of your time?" He looked to Asuma who was about to leave with the others. "Could I have Asuma stay as well?"

Tsunade looked at him in surprise. "I still have a few things to do today. Could this wait until tomorrow?"

Shikaku shook his head. "I don't believe so. It involves Shikamaru who is waiting outside. He took the loss of Naruto under his first command very hard."

"How hard?" Asuma asked worriedly.

"He is ready to give up being a ninja." Shikaku said quietly.

Tsunade looked at him. "And he is waiting outside?" Shikaku nodded. "Send him in."

When the door to her office opened Shikamaru slouched in, the indifference stamped on his features. He was dressed in a grey jacket and black fishnet shirt. His Chunin vest nowhere to be seen. He came over to her desk and without ceremony laid his hitai-ite down on it. "Hokage-sama, I officially resign my shinobi status; I

want to be an ordinary citizen." He turned around to head for the door.

"Sit down Shikamaru." Tsunade said wearily.

He stopped and looked over his shoulder at her. "There is nothing you can say that will change my mind. I am not fit to be a shinobi."

She frowned at him. "I said sit your ass down *citizen* ."

He slouched over to a chair in front of her desk and collapsed into it. "If you're going to call me a coward don't bother, my dad already tried that. Anyway I know I'm a coward."

Tsunade ignored him as she took a bottle out of her desk along with a shot glass. She slapped the glass down in front of him and filled it. "Drink." She said as she put the cork back in.

Shikamaru looked at her in real shock. "I'm thirteen!"

"Think of it as medicine for the soul, now drink it."

Making a face he picked it up and swallowed as fast as he could. He made a face as he set the empty glass down. "That's horrible!"

His dad chuckled. "You'll learn to like it."

Tsunade nodded. "Now what is all this garbage about you resigning?"

"I have simply come to realize I am not cut out for being ninja. I thought I understood what it meant, but the reality is different." Shikamaru paused and took a breath. His voice came out unsteady. "Naruto died because of me."

The three adults looked at him with sympathy. "No Shikamaru," Tsunade spoke gently. "He died because of Sasuke and because he was assigned to a mission beyond what he and the squad were capable of. I gave you an impossible mission, one that should never

been assigned to a team of a single Chunin and Genins. Though I know it doesn't seem like it, you did an excellent job to accomplish as much as you did. If anyone in this room is to blame it is me."

Shikamaru looked down. "I should have called it off, I should have told Naruto not to go after Sasuke, I should have never let Chouji fight alone, I should..." His voice choked and his shoulders began to shake wearily. "I could have saved him!" He sobbed out.

Tsunade came out from behind her desk and knelt before him. She put her arms around him. "I know, I know..."

"Hokage I..."

But she just shook her head. "Shhh, it's all right. Shed your tears for him, and let your heart grieve. I have cried for him too. Your tears make me think more of you not less." As she continued to hold him Asuma and Shikaku each put a comforting hand to a shoulder. They both lent him their silent support.

After a few minutes Shikamaru regained his composure. "Hokage-sama, thank you for your kindness. But I am afraid my decision stands. I can't be shinobi; it's more than I can bear."

Tsunade nodded sadly. "The way of the shinobi is the way of honor and of death. It is hard, but it is not for nothing Shikamaru. We are the guardians of Konoha and of every single person who lives here. We give our lives and our very souls to protect the things and the people that we love." She took a deep breath. "When I was younger I lost the two people I loved most in the world. My little brother Nawaki was killed in his very first battle when he was just twelve. And the man I loved died in front of me because His wounds were too great for me to cure."

Shikamaru looked up at her. "How did you deal with it?"

She looked at him sadly. "Oh I came up with the same solution you did. I ran away. I left Konoha with Shizune and I vowed never to

come back. I spent years trying to deal with the loss. Then I ran into the brat." She smiled at that memory of a fiery little kid threatening to beat her up. "He reminded me of what mattered the most to my loved ones and of all the things in this village that are good and worth sacrificing yourself for. Naruto convinced me to return and be Hokage. He reminded me of my duty to my village and my people."

Shikamaru was silent for a bit. "Are you glad you came back?"

She nodded. "Yes, even in spite of this tragedy I know that the village is better off with me than without me. I know what my duty is and that even if it is hard I must do what is right."

He looked at her. "So you're saying I can't resign?"

"No, if you want to run you can. I certainly won't stop you. Just know that you make a difference, that others count on you. You are shinobi and that is a precious and hard thing." She paused. "We are about to go war Shikamaru."

"What?!"

She nodded. "We are about to start a war with Sound and I know that means that many of our ninja **will** die. But I have chosen to start this war anyway in the hopes that it will lead to a greater peace once the threat of Orochimaru is gone. There will always be death Shikamaru, nothing you do can change that. But perhaps if you are there, fewer will die and you can make a real difference. Asuma is going to be the commanding general and he asked for you specifically as his aid. Will you just sit by and watch while others go to fight?"

He looked up. "Is this true Asuma?"

His sensei nodded. "We are going to war and the Hokage did name me general. And I can't think of anyone I want more by **my** side than you." He tried to give him a smile. "Maybe if you are I won't make a complete mess of things."

"The village needs you son. I've lost friends and I know how hard it is. But you have other friends who will be in danger soon. Will you stand aside and do nothing?" His father said.

Tsunade reached over and took the hitai-ite and held it before him. "I am going to ask every single ninja in this village to risk their lives to guard and protect Konoha. I ask the same of you Shikamaru. I ask you stand with us in this hour of darkness."

Shikamaru looked at her and he nodded. He took the hitai-ite from her. "I rescind my resignation, I won't abandon my friends."

She nodded. "Thank you."

The funeral

She carefully placed the journal and the bundle of letters on to the metal plate. She then took a match and carefully lit the papers. They caught with surprising ease and were soon burning. The smoke seemed harsh to her and she wondered to herself why she was doing this. It seemed like such a small and inadequate gesture. Her attempt to finally do what she had never been able to do. *I had so many chances, and I wasted them all.* She fell down to her knees before the marble altar. With eyes shut and hands clasped together she began to pray. It was not really a formal prayer, but rather a heartfelt request. *Please Kami, send him my words. Let him know that I loved him and that he was never really alone. And let him know how very sorry I am that I was never there for him.* She was too late. She could have told him, she'd had a thousand chances and more. Every day had been a new chance. Every time she'd seen him, every time he was near she'd had the chance to tell him. It hurt her to know that the reason she never had was something so small and foolish as fear that he would reject her. Even if he had he would have *known*. And maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't have rejected her. How that thought hurt! The thought that he might have welcomed her words and perhaps, in time, returned the love she had for him. Would he? Could he? Might he? But she would never know now. All because she had been too afraid to pursue what she had wanted. Would he have ever done that? Would he have ever been afraid to go after what or who he loved? No! He had been the bravest soul she'd ever known. Not because he was never afraid, not because he was never weak. But because even in the moments when he was weak and afraid he never let that stop him.

She opened her eyes and made a sacred vow there in the Hyuga family chapel. "Naruto-kun I swear to you I will never let anything come between me and my dreams. I will live my life the way you did. That is my promise of a lifetime."

"Hinata, what are you doing?" She heard the sharp voice of her father.

She felt an instant of panic, but immediately clamped down on it. *No! I won't be afraid of him anymore! Naruto-kun wouldn't be afraid and I won't either!* "I am making an offering to Kami." She spoke simply and calmly.

"Then why are you not burning incense as is proper?" His voice dripped disapproval.

"My prayer is that Naruto know that I loved him. I want him to have my words so I am burning my secret journal and all the letters I wrote to him but never sent." She could feel his eyes boring into her back but she did not turn around or get up.

"You... loved him?"

"Yes I did, does that disturb you father?"

Hiashi stared at his young daughter. Where had this sudden defiance come from? "Did you ever act on these feelings?"

"No, I was too afraid of embarrassing myself to ever do anything. So be at ease father I have kept up appearances and that is what you are worried about isn't it?" Now she did turn around to look at him.

"What would people think if a Hyuga were seen with *him* ? Well you and the clan can rest easy, we never did anything and now we never will. But if I could go back and change it I would. I would go up to the steps of the Hokage Tower and shout it out for the entire world to hear." She stood up and began walking towards him and the exit.

"Now if you will excuse me I have to put on my mourning clothes"

Hiashi frowned at her. "I have informed you that we will not be attending his funeral."

"I will be."

"You will not! If you dare challenge me daughter I will..."

"Put the bird cage seal on me and transfer me to the cadet branch? You may do so, that is your right. But if you do that I will go to the Hokage and petition to be emancipated from the clan. Given how she feels about our practices I have no doubt she would agree."

He gaped at her in complete shock. "You will not! The Hokage has no say in Hyuga business!"

"I am a shinobi of **Konoha** and I have the same rights as any other. I am going to say good bye to Naruto whether you like it or not."

"Hinata if you disobey me then I **will** put the seal on you and place you in the cadet branch. Think **very** carefully about what you say now daughter."

"I am going to the funeral." She walked past him with head held high. *For you Naruto-kun.*

"I don't think I can do this." She said wearily.

"Yes you can." Jiraiya put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

She shook her head. "No I really don't think I can. I can't bear seeing him placed in the earth. I can't stand another funeral of someone I loved."

"You have to Tsunade, not for the village or even for him really. You need to do this to help you say good bye and make peace with his loss."

She shut her eyes and saw the image of a smiling boy. *Once more, just once more, I put the odds on you.* "All right, Jiraiya can I lean on you little?"

He smiled at her and extended his arm. "Always."

She nodded and took his arm. Together they walked out.

The bells tolled mournfully. She had declared a day of mourning, there could be no business conducted and no public celebrations were permitted. The ANBU had all ready arrested over a hundred people who had been celebrating the Kyuubi's death. Some people refused to hide their true feeling, and some refused to believe the warning that they would be arrested. Most of the people were overwhelmed and not sure what to think. The announcements that the Kyuubi's container had been the Yondaime's son, that the last Uchiha had deserted to Orochimaru, that martial law was in force, and that they were now at war had all come together. It was a bit much to take all at once. Some people mourned the loss of the Yondaime's son. And then a very few mourned Naruto the person. There were only about two dozen in attendance at the service. The older people had known the truth about him all along and had come to care for him despite what he held inside. The younger had been his teammates and classmates and had all been shocked when they were told the truth about Kyuubi. But they had been his friends and they would not turn away from him now. Slowly one by one they approached his grave marker and placed a single white flower. Each of them said good bye in their own way.

Shikamaru and Temari approached together. Quite a few people wondered at this but neither of them cared.

"Good bye Naruto, you were loud and troublesome and I didn't always put up with you as well as I could have. But you were a real friend and a good guy. I'm sorry I couldn't have done better for you." He put a flower down.

Temari placed a flower down. "Thank you Naruto, for all that you did for my brother." She reached out and gently took Shikamaru's arm and they walked back.

Iruka put a flower down and stared at the photo of Naruto that was smiling back at him. "I am truly glad I got to know you Naruto. I am glad we had all those times together and I am glad I was able to give you a few good memories." He tried to brush the tears away. "I only wish I could have done more. Good bye Naruto, I am very proud of you."

Kakashi placed a small bundle of flowers down. "I failed you Naruto. I was your father's student and I owed you so much more than I gave you. When I gave you the bell test I told you all that those who fail their comrades are lower than trash. It was a lesson I thought I had learned, but then without realizing it I failed you. I gave you less than my best effort because I was too focused on Sasuke. If I had given you more of my time and attention maybe you would never have come to this. But I didn't because I was honoring Obito by helping his kinsman. I failed you Naruto and I can never make up for that, but know I will remember and honor you for the rest of my life. When I visit the memorial I will honor two names upon it. Good bye Naruto.

Sakura approached the grave silently. She stood there and looked down at the picture and the stone. *Naruto I am so very sorry that I only realize now when it's too late just how special you were and just how much you meant to me. All those times you asked me out only to have me shout or hit you. All the mean things I said and did to you just because I thought you were in the way of me getting Sasuke. I was terrible but you never ever gave up on me did you? No matter how badly I treated you, you never gave up on me. Oh Naruto! How I wish I could only have seen you then the way I see you now . You gave me the greatest gift any one ever could; you gave me a promise and then gave your life trying to fulfill that promise. Naruto you were so much better than I will ever be! You never cared about yourself when someone else was in need. I know how you felt for me but when I begged you to bring back Sasuke you set your own heart aside and promised me you would bring him back. I should never*

have asked you to do that. I was so selfish! I couldn't think of anyone else's feelings but my own. All I cared about was my own self-centered desires. I never even thought for one second what you might be feeling. You deserved so much better. I am sorry I was never really nice to you. I'm sorry I never gave you even one date. I am sorry that I never gave you the chance you deserved. But Naruto there is one thing I can do for you.

She put down the flower. She then pulled out a kunai. Without concern she ran the blade across her palm. She spoke in a whisper so no one could hear. "Naruto I swear to you on my own blood that I will make Sasuke pay for what he did to you." She walked back and ignored the looks of concern from Kakashi, Tsunade, and others.

Gaara placed down a flower. He stood there for a moment and just stared down. "Thank you... my friend."

Hinata approached with Neji supporting and helping hold her up. The ceremony had taken a great deal out of her. People saw the seal mark on her forehead and were whispering to each other. When Tsunade saw it her eyes flashed thunderstorms. Hinata was sorry to be drawing attention to herself but she was not going to hide what had happened. She was not the least bit sorry for what she had done and she was not going to hide it as if it were something to be ashamed of.

She gently placed down her flower. "Goodbye Naruto-kun, I love you. I wish I could have said that to you so much sooner. Please know Naruto-kun that you were never alone, and you were never unloved. My love is yours Naruto-kun, now and for always."

Neji placed his flower down. "Thank you Naruto, for showing me that you can make your own destiny." He placed his hand gently under her arm and helped her back.

As they did so Tsunade approached them. "Speak to me after the funeral."

Jiraiya put down a flower. "Good bye kid, you deserved better. You were every bit the ninja and the friend your father was. And you died every bit as much a hero.

Beside him Tsunade put down a flower. "Good bye Naruto. Goodbye my sweet brave boy. I am proud of you and I promise you that you will be remembered. Now rest in peace my darling one. Rest in peace knowing that you are loved and will be missed."

She turned back to Jiraiya and again took his arm. She felt all her years. She felt weary now. But she knew she would find the strength she needed to keep her promises.

A new clan

The ANBU handed over the document.

"What is this?"

"A command from the Hokage, all Hyuga clan members are required to present themselves in the Tower plaza tomorrow at noon. There is also a list naming every member who must attend."

Hiashi looked at the ridiculously long list. "This is just a list of all the clan members."

The ANBU nodded. "Yes, the Hokage included that to make sure no one was 'forgotten.' If anyone on that list is not present tomorrow the Hokage will hold you responsible."

Hiashi sent the young ninja a very dark look. "Hold me responsible? As if I am somehow in the wrong? What is this about? And what's more I demand to know where my daughter Hinata is."

"I believe your daughter is an adult is she not? Where she stays would be her own concern. As for who is in the wrong, I believe the Hokage may have something to say about that."

Hiashi felt himself growing more and more irritated. He was the head of the strongest House in Konoha and he was growing very tired of Tsunade's meddling. Neither the Sundaime nor the Yondaime had ever treated him with anything but respect. Tsunade was pushing the limits of what he would tolerate. "You are insolent ANBU have a care how you speak to me."

The ANBU tilted his masked head. "I am the personal weapon of the Hokage and I answer only to her and my ANBU commanders. What *you* think of me isn't important." The ANBU then wisely left.

Hiashi slowly tore the sheets in his hands apart.

Tsunade looked at the young woman standing before her with a heavy heart. She told herself that this was just a necessary contingency. That perhaps what she was planning would not even come into play. But if it did...

The woman before her gave her a deep and very respectful bow. "Hokage-sama, thank you for giving me this opportunity. I swear to you that I will not fail in my mission." For one of the few times in her adult life Anko looked absolutely serious.

"If you have any second thoughts Anko now would be the time to speak them." Jiraiya spoke quietly.

But Anko shook her head and gave them both a sly grin. "And pass up this chance? Not on your life."

Tsunade let out a sigh. "Anko you understand what this mission means don't you? The chances of your survival..." She let out another sigh. "Well let's be blunt, if things work out to where you're needed you won't survive. This is a suicide mission and I won't force you to take it. If you would rather not..."

"I'm taking the mission and you don't need to feel any guilt at all. You've given me a chance I didn't believe I'd ever have. I'll gladly trade my life for this objective." She smiled and so far as either Jiraiya or Tsunade could tell it was a genuine smile.

"Very well, you will leave Konoha in two weeks. Do not expect any further contact or orders. Once you are in the field you are expected to act completely on your own." Tsunade said.

"Perfect! I've got two weeks to drink all the sake and eat all the dango I can and while I'm at it I think I'll find me some cute lonely guys." She began to rub her hands together. "Maybe I can even talk Kakashi into granting me a last request." She looked back to the Hokage again and once more bowed to her. "Thank you Hokage-

sama, and please do not concern yourself with my fate. I am ninja." Those three words pretty much said it all.

Anko left and Tsunade and Jiraiya were alone in her office. Tsunade took out a bottle and two shot glasses. "There anything you want to say to me?" Tsunade asked as she poured the drinks.

Jiraiya looked at her in surprise. "No."

"You sure?" She handed him one of the glasses. "Like something along the lines of, 'you know Tsunade you really are acting like a cold hearted bitch.'" She tossed back her drink in a single expert motion and began filling a second when Jiraiya put his hand over her glass.

"What I think is that you're acting like a Hokage. "Unfortunately there are times when you must treat people like pieces on a shogi board rather than as people." He downed his own drink and began putting the bottle and glasses back away.

"That has been happening too much lately." She looked at the bottle longingly but didn't tell him to stop. "You know when I was younger I used to call the old man a fool."

Jiraiya chuckled. "Oh I remember, you had quite a few shouting matches Sarutobi-sensei."

She nodded as well. "I used to blame him for everything. He was the Hokage; he had all the power of Konoha. I truly believed that if he had really wanted peace he could have brought the fighting to an end and saved so many lives."

"So he could have." Tsunade shot him a look. "All he would have had to do is surrender to our enemies and allow everyone to be made slaves and allow Konoha to be burned to the ground."

She nodded. "That seems so obvious to me now, but not back then." She leaned back into her seat. "And now here I am deliberately

starting a war and giving the orders that will kill so many young shinobi... like Dan and Nawaki."

"Would things be better if you stopped now?" He asked reasonably.

She hated to do it, but she shook her head. "In the short term they would be, but not in the long."

"Then focus on that and try to do the best for Konoha that you can. You have a mission like any other shinobi in this village."

She nodded. She needed to do the best that she could. "Well then let's move on to the next order of business." She pressed down a button and spoke into the intercom. "Please send our guest in."

Gaara stood there patiently before her, calm and placid. She found it hard to believe that he was a demon container like Naruto had been. Their personalities could not have been more different. And according to reports he had been little more than a blood thirsty monster not so long ago. But his childhood had likely been as hard as Naruto's. She could only guess he'd found a different way of coping.

Gaara bowed to her. "Thank you for meeting with me Hokage-san."

"You are very welcome Gaara-san, and may I thank you again for your assistance and the assistance of your siblings." Gaara nodded in acknowledgement. "Have you come here today to say good bye formally before going home?" It had now been a full week since the disaster. Tsunade was a bit surprised that the sand ninjas had remained as long as they had. But with everything that was going on she hadn't had much time to think about it.

Gaara shook his head and began to remove some papers from his tunic. "No Hokage-san, I am here for a very different purpose. I have just received special instructions from Suna that will affect our relations."

Tsunade sat up sharply. She didn't like the sound of that. Sand had allied with Sound once before. Was it possible they meant to try it again? "What do you mean by that?" She said sharply.

Gaara gave a very slight look of surprise. "You need not be alarmed, the hoped for change will be a positive one. The Council of Wind has appointed me as ambassador and given me the authority to negotiate and sign treaties that will be binding to Suna. I have also received a document that I am authorized to sign if it meets with your approval." He handed over both the treaty and the letter appointing him ambassador.

She studied both quickly. *Oh wonderful! This is more than I ever hoped for.* Having looked them over she handed them to Jiraiya. "So Suna is ready to form an alliance with us?" Jiraiya gave a startled snort and read faster.

Gaara nodded. "The council realizes the grave error that was committed by the Kazekage and wishes to restore the close ties our two villages shared previously. I have been informed that if you agree to this alliance the council will immediately declare war and send an expeditionary corps here to fight beside you."

Tsunade nodded, she didn't need any time at all to decide. "Gaara please tell your government that we will welcome them as allies in this war against Orochimaru."

He nodded. "I shall. As I have said I am authorized to sign the treaty on behalf of my village. Would you like to arrange a formal ceremony for the signing?"

Tsunade smiled and picked up a pen. "Gaara, one thing I have learned in life. When opportunity knocks don't wait to open the door." She scrawled her name across the bottom and stamped her official seal. She then flipped the document around so it was facing Gaara.

Taking the offered pen he signed without ceremony. "I am very pleased to know that I will be fighting in this war. I would treasure the

chance to face Orochimaru and exact some vengeance."

"You want to avenge your father's murder?" She said sympathetically.

He looked at her with eyes so cold she actually leaned back away from him. "No," he said in a dead voice. "I want to avenge Naruto." He bowed to her. "With your permission I would like to send a message to Suna and inform them of the alliance."

"Of course, and please tell the council I hope this new peace between us will be a strong one."

"I shall." He departed.

Once he was gone Jiraiya spoke softly. "I am very glad he is on our side."

Tsunade nodded. "So am I."

One hundred and fifty three. That was the total number of Hyuga clan members including children. At the moment one hundred and fifty two were gathered in the plaza in front of Hokage Tower. For the life of him Hiashi could not imagine the reason it was necessary to drag everyone here. Of the entire clan only twelve were shinobi, what could Tsunade possibly need with the others? Hiashi suspected that this was simply the Hokage's way of showing him up, of reminding him that she did have authority over him and his clan. Hiashi frowned, that was true, but it only went so far even under martial law. He intended to demand that his daughter be returned to the Hyuga compound. If she was not there were ways for him to make life difficult for the lady Tsunade.

At last the Hokage made her appearance. Hiashi did not fail to note that she was in her formal robes. He also noted the strong ANBU presence. That alone was enough to inform him that he was unlikely to be pleased with whatever the Hokage had in mind. Along with

Tsunade came Shizune, Jiraiya, and trailing just behind then Hinata. His frowned deepened, why was she dressed in that ridiculous orange outfit?

As they approached him he gave the Hokage the very slightest of bows. "Hokage, as you can see I have carried out your *request* and brought my entire clan here to this meeting."

She nodded coolly. "Yes, my thanks on your prompt *obedience* to my *order*. "

He looked down at his suddenly troubling daughter. "Where have you been Hinata?"

"The Hokage has been kind enough to allow me to stay with her until I could move into my new home."

"Your home is with me and your clan."

"Not anymore," she said defiantly.

Hiashi focused on Tsunade. "Hokage as clan head I formally demand that Hyuga Hinata be returned to her home."

"Oh I don't think so." Tsunade said coldly. "Hinata has been emancipated from her clan. She is no longer a Hyuga and you no longer have any authority over her."

"You cannot do this! How dare you interfere with the inner workings of Konoha's mightiest clan?"

"How dare you her *father* put that despicable seal on her simply because she wanted to attend Naruto's funeral!" Tsunade remembered her little brother and how she had loved him. How could someone be so monstrous as to try and deliberately harm your own family? "As the Hokage I have not only the right but the duty to protect all those who are placed under my protection. That applies every bit as much for the Hyuga as for anyone else in this village."

You should know Hiashi that I consider that seal to be one of the vilest jutsus ever created and if I had my way I would have it banned."

"The seal has always been used by the Hyuga clan to unite and keep strong our members as well as protect the secrets of our bloodline. It is our most honored and revered tradition."

"That only proves that some traditions need to be ended." She let out a sigh. "Unfortunately my advisors," she shot an unhappy glance at Jiraiya. "Tell me that once the seal is placed it cannot be removed without causing death. I am also informed that the seal does serve a purpose in protecting the byakugan. Therefore I will not ban it."

Hiashi nodded. "As if you would dare."

Seeing the smug look on his face she took a very great deal of pleasure in what she said next. "But what I *will* do is grant emancipation to any Hyuga clan member who requests it. And if any parents wish to prevent their children from being given the seal they and their children can also be emancipated."

Hiashi gawked at her truly not believing what he was hearing. "How dare you! You have completely overstepped your bounds! If you even attempt this I will order my entire clan to abandon Konoha! Any village in the world would gladly welcome us! Stop this vile interference in the things that are none of your concern."

Tsunade nodded. "That is about what I expected. Inoichi if you would please."

One of the ANBU brought his hands up and formed a square in front of his face. " **Mind Body Switch Technique.**" The ANBU went limp but was caught by the fellow behind him.

Hiashi seemed to sway on his feet for a moment. "The jutsu was successful Hokage-sama."

Tsunade nodded. "Good, please go to ANBU headquarters with the operative who will bring your body along."

Hiashi bowed. "Yes Hokage-sama." He leapt away along with the other ANBU carting Inoichi.

The Hyugas were all stunned at what they had just witnessed. "What is the meaning of this?" demanded one of the Hyuga main branch members.

"The meaning is simple. Hyuga Hiashi is under arrest for treason, and rather than go through the trouble of a battle I simply asked Inoichi to aid us in apprehending him." She gave the man who had questioned her a very hard look. " **Any** shinobi who threatens to abandon this village is by definition a traitor. **Any** shinobi who actually attempts to do so will be branded a missing nin and killed on sight. The clans belong to Konoha **not** the other way around! I will not permit **any** clan to hold this village hostage under threat. Is that clear enough for you?" the man who had spoken up timidly nodded and stepped back.

Tsunade looked out at the crowd. They were confused and worried, but a few of them seemed curious. "Any of you who wish to do so need only step forward and you will be emancipated. Once that is done no one will be allowed to activate your seals. Any attempt to do so will be considered a physical assault upon a shinobi or citizen of this village and treated as such by the courts."

"But what happens to us then?" A young woman with the curse seal asked.

"You will have two choices. You can either just start over on your own, or if you wish, you may join a new clan."

"What new clan?" Someone asked.

Tsunade turned to Hinata. Bravely the girl nodded and stepped forward to address her former clan. "The Hokage has granted me

the right to establish a new clan and has named me as its clan head. I invite all of you to come and join me if you wish. I want us to be a family and to stop treating each other as master and servant." She shook her head with disgust. "I've seen up close the pain and hurt the split in our clan has caused. I want to heal those wounds and for us all to work and live together as a real family."

" *You* think you can lead a clan?" One of the older main branch members asked. "Who would follow a weak child like you?"

" *I* will follow her." Neji spoke up and walked towards her. He gave his cousin a deep bow and grin none of the others could spot. The two of them had worked this out before hand. "Hinata may have been shy before but don't forget she had the courage to defy Hiashi when he refused her the simple request of attending the funeral of her friend. For that, for honoring her friend, she was punished with the caged bird seal. I would be most honored to follow a clan head with such courage, conviction, and honor."

"Thank you big brother Neji, and I promise you I will always do everything in my power to protect and care for those of you in my charge. I will never treat any of you as anything but my family." Those words and the example of the Hyuga prodigy decided things. Many of the branch members began moving over to Hinata's side. Many of the parents with young children still unmarked were the first to go.

"Wait! What are you doing? You are destroying the Hyuga clan!" The same main branch member implored.

"No we are not. Any of you who wish to remain in Hyuga are free to do so, the clan will survive. But we will no longer be bound by traditions you value more than the lives of your kin." Hinata answered with great dignity.

"Where will you all stay? Where will you call home? You'll be a homeless clan is that what you want?" The man was desperate to

stop this. He was watching what he loved most in the world being torn asunder.

"We have a home." Hinata said. "The Hokage has given me the Namikaze estates and properties. We will live in the very grounds next to yours."

The man looked to the Hokage. "Hokage-sama how you can you do this?"

"Very simply. With the death of Naruto the Namikaze line is no more. The estates and fortune therefore revert to Konoha and I can do with them what I think best. And what I think best is that they be used by a new clan that will love its members rather than use them."

The man turned to Hinata and the growing crowd now gathering around her. "So what now? Will you pretend to be Namikaze now?"

Hinata shook her head. She closed her eyes. "No, I have already chosen the name for my new clan. We will take the name of the one spent every day of his life guarding this village from the threat that nearly destroyed it. The one who swore to change Hyuga one day when he became Hokage. The one who gave everything for this village and for the people he loved. The one I loved." She opened her eyes and let the tears come. "From this day forward, we are the Uzumaki clan."

A time for romance

Shikamaru was busy looking over the many sheets on his desk when he heard a knock on the door. "Come in." He called without bothering to look up.

The door opened and a certain blonde kunoichi came in. "You know Shikamaru for someone who has a reputation for being so lazy you sure are putting in a lot of hours at work."

He looked up and grinned at the older girl. "Please don't tell anyone I've spent my life developing my reputation."

She grinned at him. "Your secret is safe with me."

He noticed what she had in her hands. "What's with the basket?"

"Clear off your desk, I made you lunch and I'm going to make sure you eat it."

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "Oh? Are you afraid I'm going to starve unless you watch and make sure I eat?"

"Well knowing you lately I wouldn't bet against it. Now clear off that desk so I can start putting food out."

Figuring it would be more trouble to argue he gathered up the papers and put them in a pile on a chair. "Did you really make all this?"

She nodded happily. "Your mom was nice enough to let me cook in her kitchen."

He shook his head as he looked over the plates of food she was setting out. "Just how did you manage to get my mom to invite you to dinner yesterday? And then get her to let you into her kitchen to cook? She never invites new people over and she absolutely never lets anyone else cook in the kitchen."

"Oh it wasn't hard. Your mom came over to see me at the hotel and told me you couldn't stop talking about me. She said since you'd never shown any interest in a girl before she thought she should invite me over so she could get to know, 'the girl who has got Shika's heart on a string.'" She noticed his face turning just the cutest shade of pink. "As for this meal I think she was just making sure her potential future daughter knew how to cook that's all." She said innocently.

" *Future daughter!* " She would have never guessed his voice could hit such a high note.

She laughed and motioned for him to calm down. "Relax, I mean it's *not* like you're officially courting me or anything. I mean if you *were* to ask my brothers for their permission you would have to work *awfully* hard to get my attention. I have plenty of other *suitors* so the chances of you winning me over are pretty slim." She saw the way he was staring at her. "Though if you *did* ask to court me I might not be *too* upset by that."

"Hmmm, the food looks really good."

"Dig in; I'm sure you'll like it."

He looked at her as he began to fill up a plate. "So what hotel are you and your brothers staying at?" He tried to sound disinterested.

There was a knock on her study door. "Come in."

Neji entered and gave her a bow. "Hinata-sama I was wondering if I could speak to you?"

She smiled at him from behind the desk. "Neji, you don't need to bow or call me sama in private. I appreciate it if you would do that in public, but in private I'm just Hinata or Hinata-chan."

He gave her an easy smile and shook his head. "I can all ready tell that being an Uzumaki is going to be very different than being a Hyuga."

"I should hope so! Now what is it Neji?"

"Well, I was wondering if you would object if I were to start dating Tenten?"

Hinata sent him a look of surprise. "You're going to finally ask her out? That's wonderful! I certainly approve but it's not like you need my permission."

"Well you are clan head..."

Hinata shook her head. "Neji from now on who you love and who you want to be with is your own personal business. So far as I am concerned the clan has no say in it. No more needing permission to date. No more arranged marriages. No more sacrificing your happiness for the sake of the clan."

He smiled at her. "This really is going to be very different. I'm glad."

"Neji, if you don't mind me asking is there a special reason why you are asking her out now?"

"Well," he hesitated not sure how to explain. "I've grown to really like her and I know she likes me. I used to think that dating and trying to be happy was all pointless. But after everything that's happened I've decided to at least try and find some happiness in this life. And with war coming, I just decided that time was precious."

She sent him a melancholy smile. "Big brother Neji, you are wiser than I was."

There was a pounding on his office door. Before he could even say anything it opened and in stormed a blonde kunoichi with murder in

her eyes.

"Damn it Shikamaru what is this?" She waved a yellow piece of paper around in her fist.

"Looks like a mission assignment to me Ino."

She slammed the paper down on the desk in front of him. "Home Guard!" She yelled at him. "What the hell is this?"

He stood up and looked at her coldly. "It's your assignment."

"There is **no** way I'm staying here where it's safe when you, Asuma, and my dad are all going into the field to fight!" She put both hands on his desk and leaned her face in close to his as she concentrated all her killer intent on him. "I want an assignment with the army."

The indifference she was so used to in him began to leak away to be replaced with something she had never seen or associated with him before, anger. "No. You've been assigned to the Home Guard and that's where you'll serve."

"Shikamaru there is no way..."

"Stand at attention Genin." He said in a cold voice completely without sympathy or familiarity.

His tone and his words caught her completely off guard. "What?"

Now he leaned over the table and yelled. " **I said stand at attention!**"

Stunned she took a couple steps back from him. She'd known Shikamaru all her life and could not remember him *ever* being angry. She had never once imagined he could ever yell at her. "What... what has gotten into you?"

"I've grown up Ino, now it's time for you to do the same." He was no longer yelling but there was iron in his voice. All of sudden the lazy

fun loving boy she had grown up with seemed to gone. "This is not another one of your stupid little tantrums where you just yell until you get what you want. This is the countdown for war and killing like you've never seen. Asuma entrusted me with the selection and formation of our forces. It is a responsibility that I didn't want but one that I take very seriously! I know your abilities Ino and you are not ready for what's coming."

"Shikamaru how can you..."

"Have you actually killed anyone yet?"

She stared at him shocked. "What? You know I haven't. I..."

"Have you watched a friend die?" He said mercilessly. "Have you lost a comrade and known that maybe if you had just done a little more or acted a little differently he might still be alive? Well Ino have you?"

"What, I no, of course not."

He stared at her and she felt like a small child who had been caught doing something bad. "I know your skill level Ino and I'm sorry but you're not ready and that's final. You and Chouji are both staying in Konoha." Seeing her open her mouth he pressed on. "And don't bother going to the Hokage or to Asuma. When he gave me this assignment I told him I would only do it if he gave me *final* say in all assignments. The Hokage also agreed. If either of them tries to overrule me I'll resign and they both know I will. So just accept you're not going."

"But..."

"You are dismissed Genin," he said contemptuously. "Get out of my office right now before I call in the guard to throw you out."

She stared at him bewildered and hurt, and then quickly turned around and left.

Shikamaru sat back down, he needed a few minutes to calm back down. He wasn't sure he'd be forgiven for what he'd just done. But he wasn't sorry. He had Naruto and he knew no matter how hard he worked people were going to die. But he had decided that no matter what else happened Ino and Chouji were going to be all right. Even if Ino ended up hating him that was fine. So long as it was an extended and healthy hate.

Tenten was just staring at him as though he were insane. Feeling a bit embarrassed and a little annoyed he finally snapped. "Forget it! I changed my mind!" He turned around to leave.

That seemed to finally snap her out of it. "Wait! Neji yes of course I'd like to have dinner with you!"

He stopped and looked at her. "Are you sure?"

"Yes! I'm sorry I spaced out there for a second, but well, you kind of shocked me."

Seeing her so eager helped balm his wounded pride, and he did still want to see her. "All right I'll pick you up at six."

"Yosh! At last my two beautiful students have embraced the true meaning of love and the springtime of youth!" A stream of tears flowed out of his eyes.

Rock Lee appeared in front of him and grabbed his hand before Neji could do a thing. He began to pump it furiously. "Neji my eternal rival I congratulate you on winning the heart of such a fair maiden!"

Tenten began pulling out some kunais and picking out targets on Lee's body. Neji groaned and asked himself why he hadn't waited until *after* practice to ask her on a date.

He knocked on the door and wondered if he was making the worst and dumbest mistake of his whole life. *Man what a drag. How did I get myself into such a troublesome situation?*

Before he could decide to run the door opened. The person standing there gave him a considering and not too positive look. "Can I help you Shikamaru?" Gaara intoned.

Shikamaru took a deep breath. *This guy is probably going to kill me.* "I want to court your sister."

Gaara stood there for a moment placidly staring at him. "I see."

"Temari said I had to get permission from you and Kankuro."

"You do." From behind Gaara Kankuro took his index finger and mimed slashing it across his throat as he laughed.

Shikamaru knew the safest and best thing he could do was turn around and run. But somehow he couldn't bring himself to do that, especially knowing Temari was somewhere inside listening to all this. *So troublesome.* "So can I court your sister?"

"Why do you want to court her?"

"Because I like her."

Gaara had an expression of actual surprise. "Is that all?"

"Yes, is it enough?"

Gaara studied him for what seemed to be an hour. "Since we are allies I do not wish to kill you as that would cause too many problems between our villages. But you should be aware that if you cause my sister any harm at all I have many ways to hurt you that will not leave permanent injury."

Paling a bit he nodded. "I understand."

"In that case you have my blessing to court my sister."

Shikamaru shifted his attention to puppet boy who was still standing behind his younger brother. "Do I have your permission as well?"

Kankuro grinned and began rubbing his chin. "Well that depends, how much is it worth to you?" Temari seemed to materialize instantly behind him. "Ow!" He turned to his older sister. "I was just screwing with him a little!"

"Don't joke about who gets to court me!"

Rubbing his head he looked at Shikamaru. "You've got my blessing, and my sympathies."

"WHAT?!"

"Ow, ow, ow... help!!"

As Shikamaru watched Temari beat up her brother he wondered about what he had just done. *I actually might be in love with her. Geez what is wrong with me?*

A talk in a bar

"Can I help you Kakashi?" Tsunade looked up from her desk. As impossible as it seemed war seemed to require even more paperwork than peace did. Perhaps they could find some way to simply drop all the forms on Orochimaru's secret headquarters. The bastard would either be killed or hopelessly buried.

The copy nin looked a bit embarrassed and rubbed the back of his head. "Thank you for seeing me Hokage-sama."

"Not a problem but I am rather busy these days. How can I help you?"

"Well... it sort of involves Anko."

Tsunade frowned. "What about her? She hasn't been hurt has she?" Tsunade felt disgusted with herself that she was worried whether or not Anko was well enough to go on a suicide mission.

"Oh no, in fact I'd say I've never seen her more... energetic." He paused a bit.

"Yes? Is there point here Kakashi?"

He took a deep breath. "Hokage-sama is it true she is being sent on a suicide mission?"

Tsunade jumped top her feet. *I strangle her with my bare hands!* "That is highly classified information! Just what exactly did she tell you?"

"Nothing!" He waved his hands about defensively. "All she told me was that she was *going* on a suicide mission. She didn't say a word about what it involved."

"Even that was too much. Forget what she said understood?"

He nodded. "Of course Hokage-sama." He lowered his head. "I guess I have to."

"What was that?"

Though she couldn't see it beneath the mask he gave her a sheepish grin. "Oh it's just that she asked me to do... something and when I refused she told me it was a last request. I just wanted to see if she was telling the truth or not."

Tsunade frowned. "I'm afraid she was."

"I understand." Bowing he left. *Well I guess I can't refuse. But where in Konoha can I get leather pants and a whip?*

Gaara stood in the Hokage's office again. This time Tsunade, Jiraiya, and Baki were all present.

"Hokage-san may I personally thank you for the logistical support you are providing our troops." Baki stated.

Tsunade graciously nodded. "We are quite happy to take care of your supplies. It is enough that you have joined us."

"Though there might be an even more important way that you can assist us." Jiraiya mentioned.

Feeling a bit uncomfortable Baki tried to hide it. "If you are hoping for a larger commitment I am afraid that is quite impossible. The fifty shinobi we are providing are all Jonin and Chunin, they are the elite of our fighting forces. They are also the maximum that we can spare."

Tsunade held out her hand. "General, believe me when I say that we are more than delighted by the size and quality of your troop commitment. That was not the assistance Jiraiya was referring to."

She looked from Baki to Gaara. "Gaara, you said that you would relish the chance to face Orochimaru."

"I did."

"Still feel that way?"

"Yes."

Tsunade nodded. "I am going to share a high level secret with both of you and ask for the sake of our alliance you keep what I am about to tell you confidential."

"Whatever you tell me I am honor bound to share with my government." Baki put in quickly.

"Of course, but no one else." At their nods she revealed to them the plan to strike Orochimaru's headquarters at the very outbreak of the war. She also shared the details of Hiashi's arrest.

"So as you can see, we are currently one member short. There are many fine Leaf Jonins who could serve this role. However I want the strike force to be as powerful as I can possibly make it. We have no idea what traps or reserve troops may be there when we arrive. This is an extremely dangerous mission, as I have already said it is S plus ranked. The risks are tremendous but so are the potential rewards should we succeed."

"And you want Gaara to join your squadron?" Baki asked.

"Yes that's right." Tsunade replied.

"I am sorry Hokage-san, but I am afraid..."

"I will do it." Gaara spoke cutting off his sensei.

"Gaara consider the risks! No matter how powerful the squads you will be walking into a heavily armed enemy camp hundreds of miles into enemy territory. Even if surprise is achieved it will be extremely

dangerous. If surprise is lost it will become a suicide mission." Baki pleaded.

"I owe Uzuamki Naruto a debt that I can never fully repay. If I can destroy the one who killed him or the one who caused him to be killed I will do so whatever the risks." Gaara said flatly.

Baki looked to his student and saw that Gaara had made his choice. Sighing he knew he would not be able to stop him. "Very well."

Anko went into her favorite bar whistling a cheerful tune. She checked her watch. It was just after midnight she would be leaving in a little less than six hours. This had already been the perfect last night for her. She'd had her fill of all the things she'd liked best. Namely; sake, dango, and Kakashi. She laughed. At the moment Kakashi was passed out on her bed back in her apartment. If the poor guy thought he was done giving her that, 'last request,' he was sooooo wrong. She had decided to go hit her favorite bar one last time, swing by the all night grocer to get some more dango and then head home to lover boy.

She entered the, Copper Cellar; it was one of the cheapest and dirtiest of dives in Konoha. In other words her sort of place. Strolling in she saw it was pretty full. She recognized most of the regulars of course and a few people greeted her. As she slipped over to the bar she saw someone who definitely didn't fit in. She poked the little pink haired girl who was slumped over the bar with half a dozen empty beer bottles surrounding her.

"You're in my seat little girl."

"Huh?" The girl opened her eyes and lifted her head off the bar a few inches.

"Do mommy and daddy know where you are sweetheart?"

"Leave me alone." The girl put her head back down.

Without ceremony Anko shoved her off the bar stool. She fell onto the dirty floor to a loud round of laughter. "Go home girly. Jowa get me a bottle of sake and make it the good stuff you cheap bastard."

The bartender smiled at her. "If you want good you need to go somewhere else. What I got is cheap and strong."

"That'll have to do."

"Hey! What the hell was that for?" The pink haired girl had gotten up.

Anko sent her an amused smile. "You better run home now kid or dad's going to ground you."

There was laughter and the girl began to blush. "I'm not a kid, I'm an adult and I can stay out as long as I want."

"I can see your hitai-ite. That means you're legally an adult. Doesn't have squat to do with staying out and drinking. You're obviously new to this. Let me guess, you got your army assignment and your scared spitless."

"Ninjas don't get scared!"

Anko shook her head. "Of course we do, we just don't show it."

The pink haired girl frowned. "That's not the reason I'm here. I'm here because I'm staying in the Home Guard."

"Good! You may actually live long enough to see who wins."

"I can't stay here! I have to go out and fight!"

Anko took a long sip of her sake. Jowa wasn't kidding about cheap and strong. "And why's that sweetheart? Do you have some stupid dream about getting a whole stack of medals?"

"I have to avenge someone." The girl said in a serious tone.

That got Anko's attention. It definitely wasn't the answer she'd been expecting. "And just who are you avenging?"

"My teammate, Uzumaki Naruto."

Her hand stopped halfway to her lips. She took another look at the disheveled little kunoichi. "I'll be damned, I remember you now from the forest of death. You were his teammate weren't you? You and the Uchiha traitor."

The girl looked down and seemed to shrink. "Sasuke." She whispered "He's the one I have to kill."

Anko swallowed her drink and poured out another. "So, I see. It was Sasuke who killed Naruto huh? Funny they didn't mention that in all the announcements they had."

The pink haired girl looked up at her with familiar pain. "I guess no one really wants to think about that. Except me, I can't stop thinking about it." She paused. "I loved him, I think I still love him but I have to kill him I swore to Naruto I would."

Anko looked at the girl with more sympathy than she wanted to. "Needing to kill someone you once loved is a very hard thing. What's your name?"

"Sakura."

"Well cherry blossom girl let me tell you a little something about vengeance from someone who knows about it. It consumes everything. It's actually sort of like love in a way I guess. Once you have vengeance in your heart there's no room for anything else."

Sakura shut her eyes and hurt. "He always said..."

"Hmmm?" Anko downed another shot.

"Sasuke he always said that being an avenger was the only thing that mattered to him. He always said there was no price he wouldn't

pay to get his vengeance."

Anko nodded. "It is like love then, you can't go at it half ass or part way. You have to commit yourself with your whole heart. Otherwise it's better to not get involved with it at all."

"I think I understand now." Sakura said slowly.

"Do you?"

She nodded. "I was upset that I was supposed to stay with the Home Guard instead of going with the army. But that doesn't matter does it? If I am really committed to this I have to be ready to do whatever I have to."

"That's right. So tell me cherry blossom girl you ready to die to avenge your teammate and kill your other teammate?"

"Yes."

For some reason she could not explain Anko believed her. "Are you really ready to give your life for this? You're very young don't you want to live and see what life has to offer?"

"Naruto didn't get to live. He died because of a promise he made to me. I made him a promise that Sasuke would pay. I won't let Sasuke get away with what he did, even if I have to die."

"I see." Anko finished the last of the sake and dropped far more ryu than she needed to. As she got up she leaned close to Sakura. "Let me tell you something I shouldn't." She leaned in and whispered in the girl's ear.

Sakura's eyebrows shot up. When Anko was done she looked at her. "Why, why did you tell me that?"

Anko smiled and waved a cheery good bye. "Because I'm about to do the same damn thing with someone I once loved with all my heart. Good bye cherry blossom girl and good luck."

Anko walked out into the cold night air and headed to the all night grocer. She had just committed treason and probably helped to end the life of a young kunoichi's very prematurely.

As she walked down the darkened street she whistled a happy tune.

In the presence of mine enemies

"Therefore to avoid an unnecessary effusion of blood and loss of innocent life I call upon all forces of Sound and Rice country to surrender unconditionally. I also require the surrender of either the bodies or living persons of Orochimaru, Kabuto, and Uchiha Sasuke. Should these terms not be accepted know that it is my intention to wage war with the full might at my disposal to its very limit. I therefore leave it in your hands and not mine the choice of peace or war." Putting the document down he put his head back and roared out in laughter.

"Is this really a laughing matter Orochimaru-sama?" Kabuto asked.

Smiling Orochimaru slowly crumpled up the piece of paper. "Of course it is! Though I must admit that I am surprised to find Tsunade has such a marvelous sense of humor. Jiraiya was always the one for big useless gestures."

"What response shall we send?"

"No response." Orochimaru chuckled.

"Really?"

"Oh Kabuto-kun do you really think she sent this to me expecting me to surrender? 'Loss of innocent life.'" He laughed again. "This is for show and nothing more."

"I understand the Rice country Daimyo also received a call to surrender and is most anxious about it. He seems to lack your good humor towards the Hokage's threat."

"Well then I suppose I will have to meet with him in order to calm his fears. Kabuto arrange for the Daimyo to be brought here."

Kabuto lifted an eyebrow. "As a prisoner or guest?"

"As a most honored guest... for now."

"You haven't given me very much training." The young ninja complained.

"Oh do not be upset Sasuke-kun. It is still early and you must admit I have some other concerns to deal with. I am the Otokage after all. I must ready my village for war."

"Your war does not concern me. I abandoned my friends and comrades to gain power."

Orochimaru smiled. "You have already gained great power. After all could you have defeated the Kyuubi without the second level curse seal?"

Sasuke frowned and looked away. "I don't want to talk about the dobe. I still need *much* greater power to kill Itachi."

"You will have to be patient Sasuke-kun. You will gain more power I promise but first I must win this war."

Sasuke was frustrated but said nothing more.

The old man stood in the throne room completely on his own. His advisors and guards had not been allowed to join him. He felt himself to be completely at Orochimaru's mercy. He was certain that had not been done by mistake. For the hundredth time he cursed himself for being a fool. He should never have invited the Sannin to establish a ninja village in Rice country. Orochimaru had actually delivered on all that he had promised. He had guaranteed to bring Rice country greater wealth, notoriety, and power. There was no denying he had brought all three. The problem was in the price; it looked to be higher than he had ever imagined.

After being kept waiting for about twenty minutes the Otokage and his servant Kabuto at last made an entrance. Orochimaru climbed up to his throne and sat down. From his perch he was able to look down at the Daimyo of Rice country. The Daimyo well understood the not so subtle message in all of this.

"It is good to see you again Daimyo! It has been far too long since we last spoke. What brings you here?"

"I would like to discuss the ultimatum I have received from Konoha." *As if you didn't already know.*

Orochimaru chuckled. "Oh that," he waved his hand dismissively. "That is not something you need to concern yourself with. Konoha was devastated by the attack we launched earlier this year. Believe me when I say they are in no condition to seriously threaten us here."

"My military advisors tell me differently."

The Otokage shook his head in disgust. "And who is the expert on ninjas? Do you think your *advisors* know more about ninja forces than I do? Our losses earlier this year were far lighter than the bloodletting Konoha suffered. Believe me their armies are no threat. They may be able to raid and cause some minor damage along the frontier but both your capital and the Sound village are quite safe."

"Even if Sand also attack us?"

"Sand is a minor power and of no concern."

The Daimyo frowned. "Six months ago you were singing their praises and telling me what a great force they were. Did that change when they changed sides?"

Orochimaru frowned ever so slightly. "You are being most difficult this day. Tell me Daimyo have I ever lied to you? Have I not kept my promise to build Rice into a power?"

"Your actions are going to lead us into disaster! The Hokage threatens to leave my country a wasteland unless I surrender to her."

Now the frown deepened. "Do not mention the word, 'surrender,' again in my presence. So long as I am the Kage here there will be no surrender."

The old Daimyo felt his heart beat pick up and his stomach turn to led. He knew the next few moments might be his last. But for the sake of his people he had to continue. If he were killed people back in the capital that he trusted had orders to immediately announce a surrender and ask Konoha to send them aid against the forces of Sound. Even if he had to die at least his country would be saved. "I do not believe you can successfully guard Rice against the forces of Leaf and Sand. I have decided to accept the Hokage's terms in order to spare the people."

Orochimaru stared down at the man. "You disappoint me. You are a timid little man too afraid to fight for what is yours." But Orochimaru shrugged. "Still you are the Daimyo and I cannot keep you from doing what you think best."

The old man stared at him. "Then... you will permit me to leave here and accept the terms?"

"Of course! I would never interfere with your prerogatives."

He felt relief flood through him. "Thank you for being so understanding." Not wanting to bow he gave the Otokage a slight nod and began to leave.

"Oh, do you wish to see you daughters before you go?" Orochimaru mentioned in an off handed manner.

The Daimyo froze. A cold chill settled onto him. "My daughters? I don't understand, they are both at the summer palace."

Orochimaru let a slow smile creep across his face. "No my dear Daimyo your daughters *were* at the summer palace. When I asked you to come here I thought it might be nice to have your daughters here as well. I took the *liberty* of having some of my men bring them here. You need not look so concerned Daimyo, I assure you they are both being very well treated and enjoying their time here. I will in fact allow you to speak to them and see for yourself."

"You bastard! You've taken them hostage!"

Orochimaru shook his head sadly. "Nothing of the sort! They are my *guests*. Hostages are not needed between allies, only between enemies or potential enemies. So long as we are allies they shall remain my most treasured guests." An evil glint came into his eyes. "Now were that to change..." The old man stared at horror. He knew all the stories about what could happen to his two girls. If he surrendered now they would meet cruel ends.

Orochimaru chuckled to see the old man's distress. "Well now I am sure you wish to see your daughters before you return home and I certainly do not wish to delay you."

The Daimyo slowly nodded and exited the throne room.

Kabuto shook his head. "He didn't see that coming at all."

"Weak livered fool! As if I'd let him wriggle out of this!"

Kabuto shrugged. "Will it really make much of a difference? He has a total of about twenty thousand foot soldier and maybe five hundred horsemen. That won't really do much against ninjas."

"True, but that many will still kill a few leaf ninjas. It will also force Tsunade to divert some of her forces to deal with them. That will give us some help in this war."

"Some." Kabuto confirmed.

"Three hundred and forty four." Kabuto read off the number. "That is if we go ahead and use all the students who have had at least the basic amount of training. That is the absolute maximum number of ninjas we have available. And I am afraid that the vast majority of those will be of Genin level, we simply have not had enough time to train them up since the attack last spring."

"And how many of those have curse seals?" Orochimaru asked.

"Seventeen." Kabuto did not need to check any of the papers on his desk to know that.

Orochimaru leaned back slowly into his chair. "Perhaps I could simply give them all the curse mark that would greatly strengthen my forces."

"I am afraid it would not Orochimaru-sama." Kabuto leapt in to keep his lord from making an awful mistake. "With the ninety percent mortality rate we could expect to lose roughly two hundred and ninety in return for about thirty seven survivors. Do you wish to make that trade?"

Orochimaru considered it, but slowly shook his head. "Losing so many would ruin the benefit from making a few of them much stronger. But I need a way to increase my strength quickly." He rubbed his chin and thought. "Just how many ninjas do we have in prisons and research facilities?"

Kabuto quickly searched through some of his papers and did some quick calculations. "We have a grand total of one hundred and twenty."

Orochimaru smiled. "And how many of *those* have the curse seal?"

Kabuto looked a down at the papers again and worked his calculator. "Sixty three total, not all of those are second level either. Many of them were the experiments that allowed for the perfecting of the heaven and earth seals."

Orochimaru nodded. "Whatever the states of their seals they will be more than a match for any normal ninja. Give the rest of the ninjas without them curse seals as well. Losing ninety percent of *them* will be a benefit."

Kabuto frowned. "This will ruin much of Karen's research."

Orochimaru shrugged. "Tell her to save all the records. We can always start again later."

"There is another problem as well." Kabuto pointed out. "Many of these men have gone insane. And most of the others hate you and will join the enemy or desert at first opportunity."

"That is fine; the ones who are insane will kill anyone on sight. We'll just make sure that means the Leaf ninjas. As for the others have Karen prepare large amounts of morphine and psychedelic drugs. We'll keep them asleep until the right moment, and then give them so many drugs they'll be out of their minds and ready to kill."

Kabuto slowly nodded. "That could work." He shrugged they'll certainly do some damage." He paused and thought carefully how to word what he was about to say. Orochimaru could be very touchy at times. He was not above killing someone out of simple frustration. "Orochimaru-sama, it seems to me that whatever preparations we make we will not likely be strong enough the forces aligned against us."

Orochimaru paused for a good while and Kabuto began to worry that he had just killed himself. But finally his lord let out a sigh. "Yesss, that is true unfortunately. Though I forbid to say that to anyone else. Still it does not matter. I built the Sound village from nothing. If I must I can do it again somewhere else. I want you to have Karen and all the top research scientists sent to research facility Omega in Lightning country. Tell them to bring everything with them they need to continue their work."

"Yes Lord Orochimaru. What about everyone else?"

"Have preparations in place to save me, you, and Sasuke-kun. *Everyone* else is expendable. We will use all our recourses to defend Sound and inflict as many losses on our enemies as possible."

"That seems very wasteful. Do you not wish to save more of our personnel?"

Orochimaru shrugged his head. "No. If we lose let them think they have destroyed us completely. I realize now my mistake was moving too soon. I wasn't strong enough to defeat Konoha and I made the mistake of thinking Sand stronger than it was. I was too eager to destroy the village as the Third Lord watched." Kabuto was amazed; it was very rare when Orochimaru admitted to making *any* mistake. "This time I will stay hidden much longer, until I am certain my strength is enough to crush my enemies. I am immortal, time is nothing to me. If it takes fifty years I will rebuild it all and more. And I *will* destroy Konoha."

It begins

Tsunade and Shizune were alone together in her office. It was approaching 8 p.m. and it had been another long day. All around the village there were rumors flying. It had been a month since the declaration of war. Both the army and Home Guard had been formed up and put through some intensive training. The expeditionary corps from Suna had also been busy working on its own. Various ninjas had been spotted coming and going through the day. Wild stories were coming from the frontier, some saying a huge force of Sound ninjas was massing, others that raiders were burning and killing all along the border. Of course the greatest source of speculation centered around the fact that the Hokage would be speaking to both the army and Home Guard tomorrow morning at 8 a.m. outside the walls. Everyone was saying the speech was the prelude to the invasion order. All over the village families were having last dinners together. Friends were out sharing last nights of fun and freedom. Many couples had last dates and last kisses and more than a few had some firsts. The older generation knew what war was. The younger generation had only the experience of the brief but brutal attack on their village to draw upon. But every last one of them understood that nothing was guaranteed.

Tsunade looked out on the village that she alone was charged to protect. The village she had willingly abandoned for so many years. Until a certain cocky little blonde kid convinced her it was worth returning to and defending. In many ways everything that had been set in motion had been done on his account. The decision to begin the war and disband the council, the death of Danzo, the new alliance with Sand, the splitting of Hyuga and the forming of the Uzumaki clan; none of those things would have occurred had the boy lived.

"Do you think he would have approved of all this?" Tsunade asked quietly.

"What?" Shizune replied.

"Naruto, do you think he would be happy about all this?"

"I don't know." Shizune answered carefully. "But I don't believe he would want a war where so many would die, including perhaps some of his precious people."

Tsunade looked at her dear friend and assistant sadly. "You may be right. But sometimes to cure you must cut." She let out a sigh. "It's time Shizune."

"Hokage-sama I beg you one final time to reconsider."

Tsunade shook her head. "It is much too late for that. Please just do your best and read out the speech to them as I would have."

"I will Lady Tsunade, and please stay safe." Her henge made her look like Tsunade.

"I'll try, but it's luck that will decide that not me." Nodding Tsunade, looking like Shizune, left the office.

As she headed for the gates she took a look around drinking in all the sights and sounds. As she passed the bars filled with revelers she felt a slight twinge. As she looked up upon the cliff wall she saw the faces of her grandfather, granduncle, sensei, and friend. At some point her face would go up there too. Idly she wondered if she would live to see it. Just beyond the gates was the camp the army had set up. There were long neat rows of mostly empty tents. Except for a few guards the troops were not required to be in camp except for when they trained. Most, naturally, chose to return to their homes in the evenings. Going through the camp she felt a tremendous pride in the people she led. They might not win every battle, but they would always give their all.

Five miles from the gates she rendezvoused with the other mission members. Kakashi, Guy, Kurenai, Inoichi, Shikaku, Gaara, and Jiraiya were all waiting for her. One by one they had slipped out to come here. Now with her arrival the two squads were at full strength. "All right. I won't waste time with speeches. You all know the risks and what's at stake. If Orochimaru and the rest of his cadre die then everything will have been worthwhile. If the snake bastard gets away we'll have to deal with him again in twenty years or so. Let's end the threat of Orochimaru once and for all." All around her were nods of agreement. "Operation 'cut off the head of the snake' begins." They all leapt away and began the dangerous journey north.

Unseen one other figure hurried to follow and keep up with them.

She stood in a special room in the mansion. Compared to all the other rooms the furnishings in this one were noticeably shabby and worn. There was an old bed, a beat up sofa, and a few uneven chairs. In a closet were clothes, many of them orange. On the wall were about two dozen pictures of the one she loved. The picture that always caught her attention was his team photo. There was her Naruto-kun glaring at Sasuke who looked bored. Naruto had left no will behind and of course had no kin. So his belongings had fallen to the village. Tsunade had very generously offered all his possessions to her. She of course had gratefully accepted them. She wanted this room to become a memorial. She intended that every child born into her new clan would know and honor his memory. It was only right as he was not only the inspiration for the Uzumaki clan but he was also the last of the Namikaze whose estates they had been given. Everything that had been his would be kept in this room with one exception. She touched the hitai-ite around her neck. It had been his, the one Iruka had given him that night he had fought and defeated Mizuki. Now it was her single most cherished possession. She would never let it out of her sight; she would always keep this one small reminder of him with her.

"You know most guys who were all alone with a beautiful woman would probably want to do some other activity."

"I'm not most guys." Shikamaru replied as he moved a bishop.

"No you definitely qualify as unique." She moved a pawn and deliberately let a finger brush over the top of his right hand. "Since your dad is gone and your mom is out of the house right now are you *sure* there's nothing else you'd rather be doing with me?"

He looked up from the board and she saw something there in his eyes that gave her a warm feeling in her belly. "I can definitely think of a few things I would like to do with you while we're alone, but I don't want Gaara to kill me."

She smiled. "I won't tell if you won't."

He looked up at her again and hesitated. "If he were to ever find out he probably would kill me wouldn't he?"

"No," she answered seriously. "But he might pretend to suffocate you for awhile."

He stared at her. "Is *that* supposed to convince me?"

"I thought you deserved an honest answer." She slowly leaned her face forward over the board. "There is some danger. You will have to decide if you think the reward is worth the risk." She reached down and tipped over her king, signifying she was conceding the match. "So make a move." She said gently.

He made a move. Reaching out he gently cupped her face in his hands. Carefully and slowly he leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers. It was the first real kiss either of them had ever known. After a moment he pulled his lips back an inch and opened his eyes. He was relieved to see the older girl blushing and seeming a bit overwhelmed.

"Was that worth the risk?" She asked in a whisper.

"Yes," he said softly as he leaned in again. "Your kiss is definitely worth it." They kissed again and again and before long the shogi board and pieces were knocked over as the two of them fell into each other's arms and lips for awhile.

The night passed. The sun rose and the day began as most do. People awoke and washed up and ate and got ready for the day. For the shinobi of Konoha that meant filing out of the gates and onto the fields to listen to the Hokage speak. Many of the civilians also went out onto the fields as well. They all sensed that this would be an important moment in all of their lives.

Shizune mounted the steps of a wooden platform built for the occasion. Standing there and looking at thousands of worried faces she suddenly realized she was afraid of speaking in public. Unfortunately the Hokage couldn't show fear.

"As you all know a month ago this village suffered two tragedies. The loss of the last son of Namikaze and the betrayal of the last son of Uchiha. Months before that this village suffered the far greater tragedy of a sneak attack that was only beaten back at the cost of the Third Hokage's life and the lives of hundreds of others. All of these tragedies can be traced back to one single source. It is well known that Orochimaru who is now Konoha's greatest enemy was once a Leaf ninja. He was one of our own. He was created by Konoha and has become Konoha's mortal enemy, I say to all of you that it falls only upon us, we men and women of Konoha to end that threat. When I declared war and dissolved the council I knew that in that moment I was sealing the fate of some of you who are listening to me now. I know that war brings death to the just and wicked alike. I know the tragedy that is war and I know what it is to suffer loss in time of war. And knowing all these things I still choose to make war on our enemy Orochimaru. Not because I love war but because I love peace, and because I know there can be no real peace so long as Orochimaru remains free to unleash his hate. And so I am

sending you the shinobi of Konohagakure to end his hate and end his threat. You are the terrible swift sword of Konoha! And today I will unleash you! With absolute faith in the justness of our cause, with unquestioning trust in your abilities and devotion, and with complete certainty in our ultimate victory I hereby order the invasion of Rice country to begin!"

Shizune's heart was pounding. She hadn't wanted this duty. But she was the only one Tsunade could trust with it and so she'd reluctantly accepted. Now she stood there and listened to the roar of a thousand voices answering her. As she watched the army get moving, tents began going down and squadrons began to form up. In remarkably short time the recon units would go and then the army proper.

It had begun, and Kami alone knew how it would end.

No

They had been two days out and so far no problems. It was now morning on the third day. She lifted a closed fist in the air and they all came to a halt in the tree branches around her. Talking quietly she looked to Jiraiya. "We should be right about at the frontier." Tsunade said.

Nodding Jiraiya pulled out a map and quickly studied it. "Yeah, I'd say we're within a couple miles of it."

Tsunade nodded. "All right, we'll need to be extra cautious. From here on out we're in enemy territory. We have got to maintain secrecy at all cost. If the snake bastard finds out we're coming he'll lay a trap for us. But worse he'll bug and out and all this will have been for nothing. We need to avoid contact with any Sound or Rice patrols that may be out there."

"What if contact is unavoidable?" Gaara asked quietly.

"Then we eliminate the contact." Tsunade answered easily enough. "But if we start leaving a trail of bodies it'll become obvious quickly that *something* is going on. Kakashi..."

"Yes Hokage?"

"Can you summon one of your nin dogs to help us avoid the patrols?"

"Of course!" He took out a kunai and cut his thumb. " **Summoning Technique.**" Immediately a small pug appeared in a puff of smoke.

"Hey Kakashi." The dog said in a gruff voice.

"Hello Pakkun, I'm on a vital mission right now and I need you to keep us from running into any unfriendly units."

"No problem." The dog took a couple sniffs and looked about at the ninjas assembled around him. He gave his master a surprised look. "Any particular reason you have the girl separate from everyone else?"

Kakashi gave him a confused look. "What are you talking about?"

Pakkun nodded to their rear. "Sakura, she's two hundred yards back there."

Carefully hiding herself behind some bushes Sakura sucked in air and tried to keep her knees from buckling. She was nearing the end of her endurance. She hadn't realized her lack of conditioning until she'd had to keep up with Kakashi and the others. They only slept six hours each night and were moving at high speed the rest of the time. She didn't know if she could stand the pace much longer. She'd brought some soldier pills with her and would probably need to take one soon. She'd held off on that so far because of the price they took. She didn't know how long she would have to be awake and moving. She didn't want to take something that would eventually force her to sleep at some point. Still panting she took another look at the group up ahead. She had no idea how long they would be stopped. Doing a quick head count she counted six of them. Uh oh!

"Sakura!!" As if materializing from thin air Tsunade and Kakashi appeared right behind her. "What the hell are you doing here?!" Tsunade demanded.

She could see they were both furious with her. "I knew that you would be leading a strike force to try and take out Orochimaru's headquarters twelve hours before you spoke to the troops. I waited near the gates and when I saw Shizune I thought it a good bet that it was you in disguise."

"You've been following us for the last two days?" Kakashi said in disbelief.

Sakura nodded. "It hasn't been easy but yes."

Tsunade shut her eyes and gripped the bridge of her nose. "We've been followed by a Genin for the past two days and none of us even suspected. Some ninja we are." The Hokage focused on the young girl. "Do you have *any* idea just how much trouble you are in right now? You are supposed to be in Konoha helping to guard the village. You are guilty of violation of orders in wartime." She gave Kakashi a hard look as well. "Oh and don't think you're not in trouble as well Kakashi!"

"Me? What did I do?"

"How *exactly* did your student find out about this?"

Kakashi held his hands up defensively. "How should I know? Hokage-sama I swear I never said a word to her!"

"Actually Lady Tsunade," Sakura interrupted. "I found about this from Anko when I ran into her in a bar a couple weeks ago."

Tsunade gawked. "Anko was bragging about it in a *bar* ?! Oh I swear I'll kill her if she lives!"

"Anko didn't tell anyone else, she whispered it in my ear. She said she was going to do the same thing as I was and she wished me luck."

Kakashi gave her a concerned look. "Sakura, I don't know what she said to you but Anko wasn't being sent to try and save anyone."

"I'm not trying to save anyone Kakashi-sensei." Sakura spoke with a simple quiet certainty. "I'm going there to kill Sasuke."

The two of them looked at the younger girl in real surprise. Tsunade slowly shook her head. "I thought you were in love with him."

"I was, and I think I still am. But I can't forgive what he did to Naruto."

"Sakura you're not an avenger. You saw what happened to Sasuke when he let his need for vengeance consume him. Don't let the same happen to you." Kakashi pleaded.

"I'm sorry Kakashi-sensei but I've taken an oath. My path is set."

Kakashi frowned. *She sounds a little like Sasuke di d.*

"Enough of this!" Tsunade said testily. "We have already wasted too much time. Sakura you are not coming with us. You are to return to Konoha and to your proper post in the Home Guard. I'll decide on your punishment later. Let's go Kakashi."

"No."

Tsunade and Kakashi both froze at the sound of that one syllable. "What was that?" Tsunade said as she slowly turned back towards the young kunoichi. "What did you just say?"

Sakura felt more than a little intimidated by all the killer intent the Hokage was focusing on her. Nevertheless she squared her shoulders and held her head high. "I said no. I'm not going back. I swore an oath and I am going to make Sasuke pay for what he did."

"Forget your stupid oath you disobedient and spoiled child! Kakashi may put up with this from you but I won't! Thousands maybe millions of lives depend on this mission and I won't jeopardize it so you can play at being an avenger! You don't belong here; your very presence endangers the mission. Sakura I am ordering you to return to Konoha. That is a clear and direct order from the Hokage."

Sakura shook her head. "I'm sorry Hokage-sama but I am not going back."

Tsunade's eyes turned to slits. "Do you know what the punishment is for disobeying a direct order from the Hokage?"

"Yes but I don't care. You can punish me all you like I'm not going to go back."

"Well you're not coming with us!"

Sakura shrugged. "How will you stop me?"

Tsunade gave her a very, very cold smile. "Well how about I knock you out and leave you here to nap for awhile?"

"I'll follow your tracks and keep going."

"You're not an expert. You would just end up getting lost in the middle of Rice country." She said smugly.

"I'll take my chances."

Tsunade stared at this impossible little girl. "All right, how about after I knock you out I have Kakashi carry you back to Konoha?"

"You could do that." Sakura admitted. "But then you'd lose Kakashi or whoever else you sent for the mission."

Trying her very best to sound heartless Tsunade spoke. "I could have you killed." Kakashi sent a shocked look at her.

Sakura nodded. "That is the only way you can keep me from coming."

The two of them stared at one another in a silent impasse. And ultimately, surprisingly it was Tsunade who admitted defeat. "If I were any other Kage you would be dead right now. Understand this Sakura what you are doing right now is putting your own selfish wants ahead of the needs of your village. Whatever you may think you are in the wrong here and you will be punished when we return. I am going to strip you of your shinobi status. And you had better understand that you will be very lucky if you don't wind up in a prison cell for the rest of your days."

Sakura bowed to her. "Hokage-sama I will accept whatever punishment you chose to impose upon me for my actions."

Ignoring the gesture Tsunade turned to Kakashi. "She is your responsibility for the rest of the mission and until we get back to the village." With that she leapt away.

Kakashi stared at his student. "Sakura do you really understand what you've just done?"

"Yes Kakashi-sensei, I'm sorry if I've gotten you in any trouble."

"Don't worry about me. Sakura when the Hokage talks about stripping you of your rank I am sure she means it. This is no game Sakura. You need to head back; maybe if you do the Hokage will be satisfied with a less severe punishment."

"What happens to me isn't important. All that matters is that I keep my promise."

Kakashi looked at her sadly. "Sakura," he tried to sound reasonable. "Let's just say that somehow in spite of all the odds you really do manage to face Sasuke. What then? Even if you truly want to how are you going to defeat him?"

"I have a way." She replied simply.

"If you think giving him a kiss will do it I suggest you reconsider."

She shook her head. "No kisses, but if I get the chance alone with him I *will* take him out."

Kakashi's heart was breaking to see what was happening to her. "Sakura I beg you to give this up. Vengeance isn't the way."

"We should probably get going sensei, I except the Hokage is pretty out of patience."

She isn't listening to me anymore than he did. Approaching her he squatted in front of her. "Climb on my back and I'll carry you."

"You don't need to I..."

"Sakura I know your limits and I can see you're almost at them. If you are serious about coming with us then I can't let you slow the pace."

Nodding and reluctant she climbed on to his back. "Thank you Kakashi-sensei."

"You're welcome Sakura." With a heavy heart he got both of them moving.

Opening moves

It was nearly midnight by the time Tsunade had called for a halt and they were over two hundred miles within enemy territory. They had not been spotted, yet. Tsunade was calling for a six hour rest. They would be moving again before the sun was in the sky and they would reach their objective some time tomorrow morning. There would be no fires tonight; they were too much of a risk. Everyone just ate a rations bar and unrolled their sleeping bags. Gaara had offered to take all the watches as he never slept anyway. Tsunade had avoided Sakura as though she were diseased. The others were not so cruel, but were uniform in their opinion that she was in the wrong.

"When we reach our objective tomorrow I want you to try and stay near me at all times Sakura. I will protect you with my life." Kakashi said before going to sleep.

"Don't worry about me sensei; I can take care of myself." Sakura said.

"No you can't." He saw her about to argue with him. "That's not an insult Sakura. You have come a very long way since your academy days, but you are still just a Genin. This mission is for upper level Jonins. Look around you Sakura. Can you honestly say you fit in?"

She didn't need to look around. Everyone but her was a Jonin and two of them were Sanin. "No, I can't. But I have to do this."

Kakashi sighed. "It doesn't matter anyway; it's too late for you to change your mind." He yawned and pulled up his covers. "Just remember what I said. Tomorrow, stay close to me."

As Kakashi fell asleep she remained wide awake despite feeling exhausted. She was well aware that this might be the last night of her life. She looked up at the stars.

Shikamaru looked at the burnt remnants of the little village. There were dozens of bodies, all of them former inhabitants. There had been no ninjas defending this place. There hadn't even been any regular army soldiers. Just locals who had refused to give up. A regiment had swept through in less than two minutes without even a casualty. The fighting here hadn't even slowed the army down. The villagers had died for nothing.

Shikamaru turned to the general in charge of the invasion. "Why did they fight?"

Asuma took a long drag on his cigarette before answering. "They fought because we're the invaders here and they were trying to defend their homes."

"But it was a hopeless situation."

Asuma nodded. "When our people fight against hopeless odds we call that heroism."

Shikamaru frowned. "What do you call it when the enemy does it?"

"Fanaticism," Asuma tossed his cigarette into the dying flames around a gutted house. "I saw a lot of sights like this in the third great ninja war. Get used to it Shikamaru we'll be seeing more." He let out a depressed sigh. "And not all the bodies will be theirs."

"You should be asleep."

Sakura looked at him and trembled. "I'll get some sleep soon, thank you." She knew he was an ally, but she couldn't pretend to feel safe around him. Her last memory of Gaara before this involved him coming straight at her while being half transformed into a monster.

"You do not have to be afraid of me." He assured her.

She planted a false smile on her lips. "What? I'm not afraid."

"Yes you are," Gaara said simply. "May I ask you a question Sakura?"

"Uhm, sure."

He nodded. "When I last saw you, you were ready to die facing me to try and protect Sasuke. Now you are courting death and the anger of your Hokage trying to kill him. I do not truly understand emotions but have your feelings changed that radically in so short a time?"

She thought about that. Gaara seemed calmer now than she remembered, but he had never been a model of stability that she could tell. "My feelings have changed and they haven't. The truth is that when you last saw me I was risking it all to protect Sasuke because I loved him." She let out a sigh. "I think I still love him."

Gaara stared at her uncomprehending. "Shouldn't you try and protect the ones you love?"

She nodded. "Yes you should, but there are certain things even more important than love."

"Such as?"

She broke eye contact and looked up into the clear night sky. "Such as keeping a promise to a precious friend."

"You mean Naruto?"

She nodded. "That's right. You see Naruto died trying to keep a promise that he made to me. I can't live with myself knowing that. So I took an oath that I would make Sasuke pay for what he did."

"And the oath to your dead teammate is more important to you than your love of the living one?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Gaara truly seemed to want to know.

She took a deep breath. "Because when Sasuke murdered him he severed all the bonds between us. The instant he did that he stopped being a friend or teammate to me. Whatever I may still feel for him we no longer have ties. When Naruto died for the sake of his promise to me our bond became eternal." She placed a hand over her heart. "I can never forget him. I will carry him with me in my heart forever, and when I see him in the world to come I will fall on my knees and beg him to forgive me. Our bond can never be broken now, and it is for the sake of that bond that I will give my life to try and right what I can."

Gaara stared at her for a moment. "I do not understand."

She looked at the red haired boy and saw confusion in his pale eyes. She tried to explain it as simply as she could, "I love Naruto more than I love Sasuke."

Gaara stared at her some more, but slowly nodded. That at least made more sense to him. "Try to get some sleep. Tomorrow is likely to be a hard day."

Hinata held up a fist and her squad came to a halt. Kiba and Shino both looked at her. Currently the three of them were assigned as reconnaissance squad one of the seventh regiment. They were the eyes of the entire regiment. Which meant that Uzumaki Hinata had the regiment's eyes. "Byakugan," she activated her bloodline limit.

Kiba was scratching his nose. "Definitely ninja up ahead he said quietly." He and Akamaru were feeling just a little nervous. It was starting to look like the first real battle of this war was about to begin."

Shino nodded calmly as always. "My insects have also detected the presence of chakra up ahead."

"What's the name of this town again?" Kiba asked.

"Nagaoka," Hinata answered for him. "I spot about one hundred ninjas and maybe five thousand regular soldiers waiting for us up ahead." She activated the radio communicator that all commanding officers and reconnaissance personnel had been issued. She quickly sent out a report on what they would be facing.

"What do you think?" Asuma asked.

Shikamaru looked at the information in front of him. He had already formulated a plan of action. "We have the first, fourth, sixth, and seventh regiments all nearby we can assemble them and get an attack ready within an hour. Four regiments will give us two hundred ninja, that should be enough. We can also move the Suna expeditionary corps into place as a strategic reserve."

Asuma nodded. "We have Fire country Army units coming up. We could use them to deal with the regular army units on the opposite side. Make things a little easier for us."

Shikamaru shook his head. "The regular army units are falling way behind schedule. It will be three days before any of them are in position." Asuma grimaced. Three days might as well have been three weeks, the Hokage's plan centered around a fast surgical strike that would overwhelm and defeat the enemy in detail before they could mass into one spot. The best hope for a quick easy victory was to keep the front moving and the enemy guessing. Unless things got bogged down the Fire country troops were unlikely to do anything other than occupation duty. The battles were likely all going to be fought with ninjas alone.

"You know if we pull in the second and ninth regiments that will probably make things a lot easier." Asuma pointed out.

"For this battle I agree." Shikamaru said. "But that would require another couple hours to get the attack ready. We would also have to bring the assault on the eastern end of the front to a halt until we could move the second and ninth back. We should attack with four

regiments even though it means our own casualties will be slightly higher." He had friends in the seventh regiment. He knew he was going to put them into added danger. To his mind the war was essentially one massive game of shogi. He had to play the, 'game' to try and win as quickly as possible with the fewest pieces sacrificed. The difference was that here the pieces he sacrificed would bleed and make wives widows and children orphans. But he knew it was the right move so he stuck by it.

Asuma was willing to admit his subordinate's mind sharper than his and agreed with the battle plan.

Neji, Lee, and Tenten had been designated combat squad nine of the seventh regiment. They had been halted along with everyone else. Like everyone else they wondered why.

"I daresay we are about to go into battle." Neji replied calmly. "I can think of no other reason why they would call a halt to our advance."

"Yosh! I only wish Guy-sensei were here to witness our courageous battle! I intend to fight very hard to make him proud of me!" Lee declared.

Tenten smiled at Neji. She pulled out some kunai and threw them at a nearby tree. She outlined a perfect, 'heart' symbol. "I'm sure Guy-sensei will end up being proud of all of us." She went up the tree and began pulling out her kunai. "What do you suppose he is doing right no anyway?"

Lee had an excited grin. "Whatever it is I am sure it is an incredibly important and dangerous job that only he can do!"

Neji nodded. "Given his abilities that is likely true. I hope he is fine."

"Of course he will be fine! He is Guy-sensei! Whatever challenge he is faced with he will overcome!"

Neji and Tenten shared an exasperated look, when it came to their sensei Lee was not one to have any doubts. They began to hear shouts to form up. There were also shouts to get ready to receive battle orders.

It took more than an hour to coordinate the attack, closer to an hour and a half. But when it went in it was well prepared. Two hundred Leaf ninjas snuck in to the edge of bow range and then as one rushed in. There was only time for one mass volley of arrows before they were on the edge of Nagaoka and fighting in close with the defenders. Fortunately the city did not have an outer wall. The Sound ninjas had been dispersed among the regular soldiers and aided them all along the line.

Neji and Lee were fighting with open hands and fists against men with swords, pikes, and spears. Tenten was actually far deadlier in this fight than the two boys. Being a weapons mistress she had *a/ways* understood that weapons were meant to kill. Being in the middle of a war zone and needing to cover her two boys she was brutally efficient. Every toss was dead on target like always. Her target was usually the throat. She was loaded down with weapons and never had to get close to an enemy, killing easily and swiftly from range.

The sound ninja lifted both arms and fired off an explosive torrent of sound as Zaku had done at the Chunin exams. Kiba and Akamaru leapt away just in time to avoid it. Hinata ran towards him from the other side. A second sound nin intervened however. His body seemed to be covered in metal spikes. He fired off about twenty or so from his chest at her. Activating her ultimate defense she was able to easily block these. She was ready to continue the fight but was surprised when instead the sound nins began to pull back. She quickly looked around. All the sound nins seemed to be withdrawing while the soldiers were still fighting for their lives.

"Cowards!!" Kiba screamed at them as they fled the battlefield.

"Kiba," Hinata said. "They aren't running away look around. All the enemy ninja are leaving at once they obviously have orders."

"Yes, that appears certain." Shino agreed. "It also appears certain that the regular soldiers were given no such instructions."

Kiba curled his lip in disdain. "They're just abandoning them! Their own people!"

"Perhaps Orochimaru does not view Rice forces with the same concern he does the sound." Shino put in.

"That doesn't matter," Hinata said putting them back on track. "Let's help here and then get back to scouting." Since becoming a clan head she had become more decisive and authoritative. Her two teammates accepted her directive without a second thought.

"Nineteen dead and twelve more severely wounded and out of action." Shikamaru read the report. He was relieved that none of his friends were casualties. "The enemy lost only fifteen ninja, the rest got away."

"How many soldiers did they lose?"

"About five thousand, that's just an estimate though." Shikamaru shook his head.

"Reports are the sound nins abandoned them almost immediately. The soldiers apparently had no idea." Asuma noted.

Shikamaru nodded. "They're the pawns. Orochimaru is deliberately sacrificing them in the hopes they do us some damage, while he saves his most valuable pieces for later." He sighed. "We can expect more hit and run tactics. The sound nins will probably try to hurt us when they can without making an actual stand until we reach the sound village."

Asuma nodded. "It makes sense given that they're the weaker force. No one said this would be easy or bloodless." He looked at his watch. "If things are still on schedule the other operation should be commencing right about now."

Outside the hidden entrance to an underground fortress two guards suddenly felt their muscles freeze.

"What?" One said.

"Hey! I can't... ack." Was all the other said as a hand made of shadow gripped both their necks and choked them to death.

Tsunade looked at the members of both teams. "You know what is expected, quickly and quietly." There were silent nods all around. They quickly entered the base and split into two groups as they had planned. Hidden cameras recorded their arrival.

Orochimaru, Kabuto, and Sasuke were all in the command room. They saw the images of their enemies and would be assassins.

"It seems we have a new problem." Kabuto said as he pushed his glasses back up.

"Ku, ku, ku Tsunade you devious little fox." He sounded amused and almost pleased. "Well now you've actually managed to surprise me." He turned to Kabuto. "Sound the alarm and let's go welcome our guests."

Kabuto nodded. "Yes Lord Orochimaru." His hand came down on a button and a loud piercing shriek sounded through the base.

Sasuke looked at the images and his breath caught. "Sakura..."

The high price of vengeance

Author's Note: This chapter brings this story to its climax. I will right one more chapter as an epilogue to finally wrap things up. I hope you enjoyed it.

As soon as they entered the base the corridor split. Jiraiya's squad turned left while Tsunade's went right. Everyone (except for Sakura) had memorized the base's floor plan. Jiraiya and Tsunade carried copies with them just in case. There was no way to know exactly where Orochimaru would be, but they had several key points they thought likely. They would hit those first, killing anyone they came across. If they did not find him in any of those they would search the whole base. They were not leaving until Orochimaru, Kabuto, and Sasuke were all dead. They had not gotten more than twenty yards down their respective corridors before a piercing alarm sounded.

"So much for the element of surprise," Tsunade muttered. Her radio communicator came to life.

"What do you want to do?" It was Jiraiya.

"We continue with the plan." She replied.

"They know we're here." With that Jiraiya once again proved he was the master of the obvious.

"Yeah they do," Tsunade agreed. "Now we see if they can stop us." Instead of a reply from Jiraiya she heard a loud pitched screech come over the line. She switched off the communicator. "They're jamming the radio frequencies, we're on our own."

The others simply nodded. Sakura did as well though she felt a mounting panic. She was really beginning to understand that she

didn't belong here. She tried to comfort herself with the thought that with Tsunade, Kakashi, Kurenai, and Gaara with her things should be all right. It was right then that the floor opened and they were dropped into a pit covered with spikes.

" **Summoning Technique.**" In a puff of smoke a large red and black frog came into existence. Slapping one foreleg against each wall the frog brought them both to a temporary halt. Jiraiya turned to the others. "He can only hold those back for a moment. We need a way out." Just before the walls had begun closing in on them thick iron doors had slammed down at either end of the corridor.

"Yosh! I will deal with it!" Guy rushed forward. " **Initial Gate: Open!**" He could feel a sudden burst of power surge through him. He slammed a fist into the iron door and with a loud crash sent it flying down the hall. Jiraiya, Shikaku, and Inoichi quickly got out of that section of the corridor. They had no sooner escaped then the armored frog disappeared with a puff of smoke and the walls slammed together.

They were no sooner out than a hail of kunai came down on them. About two dozen armed guards were attacking them.

" **Shadow Possession Technique.**"

" **Mind Destruction Technique.**"

" **Rasengan.**"

" **Konoha Hurricane.**"

Two minutes later.

The four of them were surrounded by thirty bodies. As per Tsunade's orders they were not taking prisoners.

"Traps and regular guards." Shikaku smiled. "I never thought it would be this easy."

"Yosh! We will surely succeed! These foul men have no hope of defeating those with the power of youth!"

"I wouldn't start celebrating just yet." Jiraiya pointed out. "We haven't run into Orochimaru or Kabuto yet. Not to mention whatever surprises that bastard has in store."

"You all right Sakura?" Kakashi asked.

"Sure," she panted. She had screamed when the floor had opened and she'd seen those spikes. Gaara's sand had come out immediately and created a, 'floor' above the spikes. After that they had run into about twenty guards. Sakura hadn't even needed to use her kunai. The others had dealt with them swiftly and brutally. Now she was struggling to keep up with everyone. They burst through a shut door and into a vast cavern like space. There were dozens of barred doors along either wall as well as a walkway up above them.

"What is this place?" Sakura asked between gasps.

"A dungeon where prisoners are kept." Kakashi replied.

No sooner did he answer than all the lights came up. The five of them halted and formed a circle in the middle of the vast room.

"Ku, ku, ku, welcome to my humble home Tsunade."

Everyone's eyes jumped to the simple metal walkway on the far wall. There stood Orochimaru, Kabuto, and Sasuke peering down on them.

"Orochimaru you heartless bastard!" Tsunade screamed. "Now I'll finish what I began in that little village. You're going to pay for what

you did to the old man! Kabuto, you're going to pay for your betrayal! And you Sasuke! You're going to pay for what you did to Naruto!"

Orochimaru laughed. As he did so seals on some of the barred doors began to smoke and give way. As nine doors swung open some men stumbled out. "You've come here to collect on a great many debts it seems. A bit ironic given your own history. Alas sweet Tsunade I have no intention of giving you what you want. All of you," he shouted down. "Kill them and I will give you your freedom!" The men murmured eagerly and all of them activated their second level curse seals.

Tsunade glared at them as they approached. "Hey you idiots! Do you *really* think Orochimaru is going to free you?" The men shouted and began to rush forward.

Kakashi swiftly formed a Raikiri. "I don't think their listening."

"Idiots!" Tsunade flooded her right wrist with chakra.

Gaara was calm as sand leapt about his feet. "It does not matter how many we have to kill. We *will* avenge Naruto's murder."

Sakura focused all her attention on the boy standing so far above her.

A ninja with two massive horns sticking out of his forehead came right at Tsunade. She slammed a fist into his chest and sent him flying about twenty feet. Such a powerful blow would have killed most ninja. The curse seal shook it off and got back on his feet. Tsunade had to dodge as she was attacked by a curse seal with a right fist the size of a boulder.

As one curse seal spat fire at him he tried crushing another. Unfortunately his hide was strong enough to resist being crushed. The sand near him rose automatically to shield him from the flames. The ninja he had in his grip was screaming at him.

"I'm going to kill you, you... ackk." His tirade was cut off as sand flowed down his throat. If crushing wouldn't work there was always suffocating.

A curse seal with spines coming out of his back found himself somehow embedded within a tree. Not even realizing it was a genjutsu he struggled to free himself. Meanwhile Kurenai appeared behind him with a kunai in hand.

Kakashi plunged his rakiri into an enemy's chest. The ninja cried out and collapsed to the ground. He quickly reverted back to human form.

"One down," Kakashi said as his rakiri dissipated. Rather than form another lightning blade he created a chidori which took less chakra. With what he had left he could either for two raikiri or four chidori. Looking back to where the rest of them were he suddenly shouted. "Sakura look out!"

As everyone else was engaged a seven foot tall curse seal with a monstrous boar's head came at Sakura. Her thrown kunai bounced off his thick hide harmlessly. She leapt away but the curse seal ran forward and managed to catch her right leg in a massive paw. He slammed her down to the ground. She cried out as she was sure she was about to die. Then she heard the chirping of birds. As she watched the curse seal's chest exploded in a shower of blood as a ball of visible chakra punched through from behind. The curse seal dropped and returned to human. Standing there in his place was...

"Sasuke," she whispered. Without a word he grabbed her and performed a shunshin and they were both gone.

Orochimaru laughed. "Ku, ku, ku it seems our young avenger is in love."

Kabuto frowned. "He has turned on you."

Orochimaru shook his head. "Nothing of the sort, he isn't fighting for Konoha. He just wanted to save his little girlfriend."

"He killed one of your ninjas." Kabuto pointed out.

"So? They are all expendable after all."

Kabuto watched as Kakashi killed again. "There are only four left shouldn't we join the fight now?"

"Yessss, let's." Orochimaru both leapt down into the fray.

Sakura found herself in a small room with Sasuke. He immediately let her go and frowned at her. "Sakura what are you doing here? What were Kakashi and Tsunade thinking bringing you here? Stay right here until I can come back for you. When all this is over I'll get you out of here."

Somehow she had known this would happen. She had been absolutely certain that if she came here that she and Sasuke would end up together. As he lifted his hand to perform another shunshin she grabbed hold of his wrist with all that strength that Naruto had always dreaded. She had never once used her strength on *him* of course. She could see his surprise when he felt her vice like grip.

"Why." She asked him.

"Sakura, let go of me. I don't have time to fool around with you."

"Why?" She repeated, ignoring all he had just said. "Why did you just save me when you killed Naruto?"

Sasuke stared at her. "What difference does that make now?"

"I want to know Sasuke." She said bitterly. "He was your *friend* and he went after you because I begged him to bring you home. He risked his life to try and save you."

"Save me?" He looked at her coldly. "Neither of you ever understood." He shook his head. "I tried to explain it to you that night and I explained it to him as we fought. I was never like the two of you. I had to have my revenge against my brother, nothing else mattered. Naruto got in my way."

"He got in your way?" She could see a look of pain in him as she tightened her grip. "That's it? He got in your way and so you killed him?"

"That's right Sakura. I'm an avenger; all that matters to me is gaining my vengeance. For that I'll pay any price and make any sacrifice, including that dobe."

She hit him. She continued to hold on with her left hand as she punched him with the right. "Don't you dare call him that you heartless bastard!! He was a hundred times the person you are!" She shook her head in disgust. "Oh kami, to think I actually used to *admire* you! I can even remember when you told Kakashi-sensei that your sole ambition was to kill a certain man, I thought you were cool! Well you were never cool or deserving of admiration. All you ever were was a hurt, scared, little boy who was never brave enough to try and deal with the tragedy in his life."

Sasuke glared at her not believing what he was hearing. "What the hell would you know about it Sakura?"

"I know that Naruto suffered longer and worse than you ever did! You lost your family but the whole village was there for you! There were always people there who wanted to help you! You were alone by choice Sasuke, because you always shut everyone out! Naruto never had any of that! He never had a choice about being alone! He never knew what it was like to have a family or a real home! But he never let the pain devour him! He never gave into his sorrow or depression. No matter how much he suffered he *never* gave up! He never lost hope! As far as I'm concerned you're nothing compared to him!"

He grimaced at her. "Funny how you never thought that way before."

The shame she felt darkened her cheeks. "You're right Sasuke; I was a stupid and shallow girl. It took Naruto's murder for me to finally see beyond the surface and look underneath the underneath."

Sasuke shook his head. "Sakura, whatever you may think of me now I don't want to hurt you. Now let go of me or I'm going to have to."

"Why do you even care about hurting me?"

He looked at her sadly. "Because I care about you, at least a little bit."

And in spite of everything she grinned slightly. "You know Sasuke not too long ago if you'd said those words to me I'd have been overjoyed. It's a shame that when I finally hear them they mean nothing to me."

"You can hate me if you want to Sakura, but I don't hate you." He paused. "And I never hated Naruto either."

She stared at him.

He sighed. "All right Sakura I've had enough of this, let me go right now or I'll have to hurt you."

"You know I finally understand you Sasuke, at least a little. When you're an avenger you do what you have to, even when your heart's not in it." She spoke sadly.

He eyed her warily. "That's true, but don't start thinking you understand me and my need for vengeance."

"But I do Sasuke, because you see I'm an avenger now too. I swore I would make you pay for what you did to Naruto. I'm going to kill you."

Sasuke looked at her in surprise, but without fear. He had not activated his curse seal. He stood before her in his regular form.

"Sakura," he spoke in a reasonable tone. "Don't be stupid. We both know that even like this, with you having a hold of me, there's no way you could ever take me in a fight."

She nodded. "That's true," with her free hand she reached to the collar of her red dress and tore it open. "That's why I tied on hundreds of explosive notes to my body."

His eyes widened as he could see that she really had. "Sakura!"

"I love you Sasuke. Goodbye." With her chakra she activated all the notes at once.

An explosion rocked the base.

"What was that?" Kabuto asked. He leapt back to avoid Kakashi's chidori. He and his master were the only ones left fighting the leaf nins. The rest were dead and their bodies and blood scattered all around.

"Hopefully that was Jiraiya blowing up something important." Kakashi said.

Kabuto had stayed ahead of Kakashi, but as he landed his feet were grabbed by sand. "No!" He shouted.

The sand quickly covered up his whole body. Gaara made a fist. "**Exploding Sand Funeral.**" Kabuto's body exploded in a shower of blood.

"No!" Orochimaru shouted, temporarily distracted by the loss of his most valuable servant. In that instant a chakra enhanced fist smashed into the side of his face and sent him flying.

"Worry about yourself you bastard!" Tsunade shouted at him. "It's over Orochimaru!"

Sitting up in the spot where he'd landed he saw the four remaining enemies facing off against him. He laughed. "Ku, ku, ku yes, this fight is over and you have won it. Congratulations," he began to melt into the ground. "I suppose I shall not have the pleasure of defeating you and Jiraiya baka. But have no doubt; even if it takes me another fifty years, I will destroy Konoha." And with that he was gone.

"That bastard." Tsunade bent over at the waist and began huffing. "Is everyone all right?" There were nods all about.

"Everything went pretty much as you expected." Kurenai sounded impressed.

Tsunade nodded tiredly. "Now we just need to see if the final part works out as planned."

"Hokage-sama," Kakashi spoke urgently. "Now that we've defeated Orochimaru our priority should be to find Sakura!"

She nodded. "Yes, lets find that poor girl before something happens to her." Despite the fact that she would punish her, Tsunade still felt for the child and wanted to save her from any harm.

Kakashi summoned Pakkun. "Pakkun find Sakura." They began to move.

As they did so Gaara spoke to Tsunade. "Do you believe the final part of the plan will work?"

She slowly nodded. "I do."

Gaara appeared surprised. "You do not seem happy."

"I'm not, I'm thinking about the price and about what a cold hearted bitch I am."

Orochimaru appeared outside his base. He was exhausted and much of his chakra had been expended in the battle, but he would live to fight another day. He had decided there would be no more battles against Tsunade or Jiraiya. They were both simply too dangerous. He would bide his time now. When they were gone Konoha would be vulnerable. He was immortal; time meant nothing, though he was disappointed that Kabuto and likely Sasuke were lost. He saw one of his guards quickly approach him. "Go back in and order the base self destruct."

The guard approached him, and smiled. Without warning the man reached out and grabbed a hold of him. **"Twin Snakes Shared Death Technique."** From out of the guard's arm a pair of black cobras emerged. They each immediately sunk in their fangs into an arm and began to pump in their poison.

"NO!" Orochimaru screamed. This was one of his techniques, and he knew that even he could not survive it.

The henge disappeared in a puff of smoke. There was Anko; she was already looking pale and weak as the poison coursed through her. "Hello again, sensei."

"Anko you little fool what have you done?" He gasped out in pain.

She smiled at him. "What you taught me to, what you always wanted me to. Killed without hesitation or regret. Are you proud?" She wouldn't let go of him and they both sank down to their knees. She chuckled. "What's wrong sensei? You look afraid."

"You stupid little girl," he could feel his body numbing. "I was supposed to be immortal; I was destined to learn all the world's jutsus."

"Well I was always destined to die with you, so at least one of us succeeded huh sensei?" It was getting hard to breathe. "You should have cared for me... just a little... I love you so."

Orochimaru collapsed back into the grass and Anko fell atop him.
"Stupid... girl."

Anko shut her eyes. She always knew that this was how it should end, with him. The one she hated and loved most of all.

Kakashi knelt outside a ruined corridor. "Are... you sure Pakkun?"

His nin dog nodded. "I am sorry, but there's no doubt. I have Sakura's and Sasuke's scents mixed together with the explosive. They were both definitely here."

Kakashi hung his head and shut both his eyes. "How... how did I let it come to this?" They were all gone now. The three young students he had taken under his wing. The three young ninja he had sworn to protect and teach as sensei, were gone. How could he have failed them all so miserably? The tears fell as once again his heart broke.
Father, Obito, Sensei, Rin, Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura; why do all the people I care for die?

Tsunade put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Kakashi I am very sorry, but we can't stay here. We'll grieve later, right now we have to find Jiraiya's squad and get out of here.

He slowly nodded and wiped the tears from his one visible eye.
"Right, of course, Pakkun see if you can find Jiraiya and the others."

They were soon able to find Jiraiya's squad and a couple others. The squad had a couple teenage girls dressed in kimonos.

"They're the Rice Daimyo's daughters. Orochimaru was holding them hostage. If we can let him know they're safe he will probably surrender to us."

Tsunade shook her head. "Well trust you to go into Orochimaru's strong and come out of it with a pair of underage girls on your arm.

All right let's get out of here."

As they departed they found the bodies of Orochimaru and Anko just outside the base. With Orochimaru's death Tsunade knew the war was a success no matter what the final cost was. The greatest threat Konoha had ever known was now gone forever. But seeing Anko's corpse as well she could not bring herself to rejoice. Willing or not she had sent Anko to her death deliberately and without hesitation.

Now they all headed off to try and rejoin the army of Konoha and bring the fighting to a final end.

One year later

ONE YEAR LATER

Tsunade was looking out her office window. The crowd was already gathering down in the plaza. She could hear some of them chanting and singing. There were a few drums being banged on as well. It was all in celebration. She flattened out some wrinkles in the Hokage robes she had on. She didn't much care for wearing them or for making speeches, but for today she would make a willing exception. For today they would celebrate their victory in Naruto's War. She smirked wondering what the brat would think about having an actual war named in his honor. She supposed he would probably grin and say it was cool.

Looking on her desk she looked fondly at a picture of him. He was of course smiling. She picked it up and smiled back at the photo even as she felt the tugs on her heart. "I kept my promise kid; they'll *never* forget you now." She had made damn sure of that. Outside the tower entrance there was a statue of him. In the academy the students were told about the boy who had born the burden of holding the Kyuubi, who had defeated Gaara the possessor of the Shukaku demon, who had battled right beside her and Jiraiya against Orochimaru and who had ultimately died trying to save his friend from abandoning his village. To the future generations Naruto would be a hero just like his father. Sighing she put the picture back on the desk. Of course she had wanted them to know the *whole* truth about what he had endured growing up; the loneliness and the abuse. But somehow *those* facts seemed to get left out. She supposed it was only natural, after all who would want to admit to hating such a hero?

She shut her eyes and leaned back in her chair. He had been such an amazing kid. What might he have accomplished if only he'd lived? He would have been her successor, of that she had no doubt at all. He would have changed the world had he lived; really he had changed it even in death. What had once been Rice country was

now Rice province, a part of Fire country. The war that they'd be remembering today had come to a surprisingly swift conclusion once the news got out that Orochimaru was dead and that the Rice Daimyo's daughters were safe. Immediately the Daimyo had surrendered to her unconditionally. With that she had called a halt to the policy of burning everything and resistance from the civilian population and Rice troops had ended. Many of the Sound ninjas also either surrendered or fled. In the end only about a hundred hard core Sound nins had insisted on making a last bloody stand in their village. They were the ones who truly believed in Orochimaru and loved him (much as Anko or Kabuto had.) They had been annihilated along with their village in the climatic last battle of the war.

The war had been short but had changed so much. The single greatest change of course was the existence of clan Uzumaki. When the time had come to form a new Council she had made sure to give Uzumaki a hereditary seat. Of course the Hyuga clan had been livid about that; they refused to recognize the Uzumaki as being legitimate. Tsunade frowned remembering the near riot that had been the result of a Hyuga member activating the curse seal of an Uzumaki. That had happened *once*. The offender had been arrested, tried, and was now serving a ten year sentence for assaulting a shinobi of the leaf. Despite the problems Hyuga Hinata was proving to be an outstanding leader even at her age. Alas it seemed she was destined to never find real happiness, even after a year there was still something missing in the girl's heart. Tsunade could understand that (ah Dan,) but she hoped in time Hinata would be better able to deal with the loss. Neji and Tenten were happily dating. And speaking of dating there was a more mature and serious Shikamaru dating the Suna ambassador Temari. Tsunade hoped that things remained smooth between Shikamaru and Temari, as she did not need hostility from the Kazekage's sister.

Not everyone had adjusted so well. Upon returning to the village Kakashi had requested to be returned to the ANBU black ops. He made it unmistakably plain that he would never again be a Jonin sensei. Once returning to the black ops he had quickly become a

complete loner, going so far as to refuse to acknowledge Guy or Asuma anymore. She was worried about him as he seemed constantly depressed and isolated. But he was an adult and a functioning member of society, not to mention an outstanding ninja. What could she do?

Thoughts of troubling men brought her to Jiraiya. She sighed and shook her head. What had she been thinking to actually agree to a date? Her relationship with the man was... troubling. They were not really dating, but had become a bit more than friends. Unfortunately the old pervert absolutely refused to give up his old habits including his, 'research.' Despite herself she smiled just a little.

Problems had hardly gone away. Akatsuki was still active, though they appeared to have given up capturing biju and jinchuriki. What their new goals were remained a mystery but they were a serious threat. There were also distant rumblings from Earth and Rain countries and something strange was going on in Lightning. Still, with Orochimaru dead and Sound destroyed there was no question the world was a better and safer place. She looked at the picture on the desk. But she would trade it all to have Naruto in her office calling her baachan again.

There was a knock on the door. Without waiting a reply it opened and Shizune stuck her head in. "They are ready for you Lady Tsunade."

"Fine," she got up from her chair. "Let's get this over with." She chuckled. "Maybe I can talk Jiraiya into buying me a few drinks later."